R

MARY ELWOOD.

A Novel.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

BY

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VOL. II.

LONDON:
REMINGTON & CO., PUBLISHERS,
HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN.
1884.

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CHAPTER I.

My project may deceive me,
But my intents are fixed and will not leave me.

MARY appeared downstairs as usual in the morning, and went round and kissed her sisters and step-mother in an absent sort of way, without an attempt at a smile.

"Where were you last night, Mary?—Couldn't you find shelter?—Why were you so late?" came in a chorus.

"I was on the hills, and was caught in the storm."

"What a goose you were. You might have seen that it was coming," said Effie. "You

missed Lady Stephens, too. She called just after you went out."

"I was sorry that you were not at home," chimed in Mrs. Elwood. "Lady Stephens asked especially after you."

"Really!" said Mary; but she showed so little interest that the subject was dropped.

She moved about as if in a dream, hardly speaking, and sat through Gertie's French reading like a lay-figure, only rousing herself occasionally to say languidly, *"Faites la liaison."*

"Am I reading very badly?" asked Gertie at last. "You look as if you were being martyred."

"No, you're doing very well."

"I believe you are ill."

"No, I am all right. Go on."

Gertie said no more, but continued her reading, and Mary forced herself to show more interest, but stopped the lesson promptly as soon as the hour was over, and went to look

for her step-mother. She found Mrs. Elwood alone.

"Are you at liberty, mamma? Can I speak to you for a minute?"

"Yes, what is it?" returned Mrs. Elwood, looking at her anxiously, for Mary's pale face and strange, abstracted manner had been puzzling her all the morning.

"I want to be a governess, mamma. I hope you won't object."

"What do you mean? Have you lost your senses?" exclaimed Mrs. Elwood.

"Certainly not. I have thought over it calmly, and weighed the advantages and the disadvantages, and I am quite sure that I shall be happier, and that it will be better for me. I know I am not twenty-one, and that you can force me to stay at home, but I hope you won't do it."

"I don't think you know what you are talking about, child. If you can't be satisfied at home, you may be sure that you will not

find more kindness and consideration elsewhere."

"I shall not expect it."

"But I should not hear of your being so foolish, so say no more about it. And such a home as you have got! I am sure it is your own fault if you are not happy."

"I must go," persisted Mary, in a low tone, her voice beginning to tremble with suppressed excitement.

Mrs. Elwood looked at her. She was always a little afraid of the girl, and doubtful whether she could coerce her, so she resorted to parleying.

"What is your reason?"

"I can't give it. But listen to me this once. Don't put any hindrance in my way. I shall do nothing to disgrace you, and it will be happier for everybody. Please promise not to say anything to the others about it until it is decided. I will ask you about it again to-morrow."

Glad to gain time for thought, Mrs. Elwood agreed.

Mary put in an appearance at meals, but disappeared immediately after, locking herself up in her bedroom.

Her step-mother was at her wit's end, and could not think what had happened to put the idea into the girl's head. She had no particular objection to governess life for Mary; indeed, she thought the discipline of such a position might be useful to her. But what would people say? And it would certainly be looked upon as a mad freak, and might ruin her prospects. But, on the other hand, Mary was getting beyond her control, and if she were opposed in this matter she might adopt some course which would be worse; so when she presented herself again and asked —

"What have you decided, mamma? Will you stand by me?" Mrs. Elwood, instead of answering in the negative, began to argue the point, painting the disagreeables of a depen-

dent position in forcible colours, and urging as an objection the opinion that would be passed upon such a proceeding in Brentham.

"I don't care what people say. It is no business of theirs, and I am going to do what I believe will be for the best."

"Well, I don't know but that it would be a good thing for you to try. You might learn to value your home."

"Then you won't oppose me?"

"You must take your own way, and the responsibility. I wash my hands of you."

"Grant me one more thing. Please tell the others next week, and ask them not to speak to me about it. I shall be so grateful."

Mrs. Elwood did as she was requested. Effie and Gertie obeyed orders, and contented themselves with staring at Mary as if she were a stray specimen from a menagerie, but Tom bluntly replied, "I *shall* speak about it," and took the very first opportunity of doing so.

He had been grumbling at Mary and her

unsociable temper during the last week, and had once suggested to her that if she meant to go on in that style she had better apply for a separate maintenance, to which Mary had replied, "I may take your advice;" but he had no idea that she was really going to act upon it, and could not bring himself to believe, in spite of Mrs. Elwood's asseverations, that she was in earnest.

"What is all this nonsense I hear about you?" he asked her, curtly.

"I am sure I cannot tell, Tom," replied Mary, coolly, looking him full in the face.

Her coolness exasperated Tom.

"What did you expect to get by talking to the mater in that style?"

"Perhaps you have forgotten the advice you gave me a little while ago."

Tom waved his hand angrily. The two appeared to have changed characters. Tom was heated and out of temper; Mary was perfectly composed.

"You will please remember there are

others to be consulted before you make a fool of yourself and disgrace the family."

"Is that your idea of disgrace? It isn't mine."

"I don't care what your ideas are; but you may give up this ridiculous scheme."

"Go I shall, Tom. And if you exercise your authority, which I don't own, to prevent my leaving home in a quiet and ordinary way, I shall go in a way that you will like still less."

"It certainly is not for my pleasure that I wish to keep you at home," he sneered.

Mary's eyes flashed, but she answered with perfect self-control —

"I am sufficiently determined to go without your adding any persuasion."

"Go, then!" said Tom, savagely. "But before you publish to the world that you are such a vixen —"

Mary's tiger rose. She drew herself up, and her eyes flashed dangerously. Their

lightning seemed to strike Tom dumb, for he stared at her an instant and then turned away without finishing his sentence.

After a few moments' silence, Mary asked, as if nothing had happened —

"Is it pleasant out?"

"It's not amiss. There will be rain," returned Tom, in the same way.

"Then I had better go out before it comes," she said, and left the room.

Tom did not again allude directly to the subject. He was moody and taciturn, seldom spoke to her, but occasionally spoke *at* her, inquiring whether Polly had "found a place," or "got suited," and suggesting that she might write to Uncle Horace to recommend her.

"Uncle Horace," their mother's brother, was a retired Colonel. He belonged to an old Hampshire family, and was a proud, hot-tempered man, with a peremptory manner acquired in his regiment.

Many years ago he had paid a visit to his brother-in-law in the North, and one or two sarcastic remarks still lived in the memory of the Elwoods, for children, when they understand satire, are slow to forgive it. Mary had been very careful that no news of her intentions should reach her uncle, and there was not much likelihood of its getting round to him, for he had not been smitten with his sister's successor, and had heard little, and seen nothing, of his nephews and nieces since their father's death.

Tom's disagreeableness and the constraint and distance between herself and her sisters, the natural result of their being forbidden to speak upon the subject uppermost in their thoughts, made Mary the more anxious to find a situation as soon as possible. She was obliged to wait for some time, as Mrs. Elwood insisted that she should give herself a month to think over it before taking any steps. Then came troublesome negotiations

in answer to her advertisement. One lady, to whom she would have liked to go, thought her too young and inexperienced; another found her too handsome; a third she did not like.

All this time she was making diligent preparation, working hard at arithmetic and algebra, rubbing up the weak points in her German and Latin grammar, and practising two hours daily.

Mary had too much sense to imagine that anybody could teach, or even that a clever person must necessarily be a good teacher; but she had a firm belief in the existence of a large reserve of latent force in human nature. This persuasion it was that led her to try her strength with Tom at tennis, and to enter prize competitions and attempt difficult things again and again, feeling sure that she might succeed if she could but bring the necessary pressure to bear upon herself. It also led her into the mistake of imagining that enthu-

siastic resolution might take the place of patient labour and practice, and that a mood of exaltation under sufficient stress of circumstances might produce, for the time being, a Raphael or a Rubinstein. This faith flattered her hatred of impossibilities, and widened to her imagination the area of man's capabilities. Happily common-sense prevented her from depending upon such a source of strength, and she cultivated with much patience whatever faculties she felt herself possessed of, adopting the surer means of obtaining success, while she held the other in view as supplemental.

The notion had its use. It acted as an encouragement when present attainments fell short, and powers were small, and, when the future was alarming, whispered a hope that she might rise to the occasion, and helped her to

> Trust to the moment with a dauntless mind.

This she was obliged to do in the present

case so long as her pupil's powers and proficiency was an unknown quantity. The pupil herself became at last a very shadowy personage, and Mary began to fear, as one negotiation after another came to nought, that she might not be able, unaided as she was, to find a suitable situation.

If everything at home had been pleasant, her resolution might have failed, for Mary readily forgot and forgave. Even towards Sydney she felt no active ill-will, though the sight of him vividly recalled that afternoon, and she avoided him as much as possible.

But the wound was too deep to be easily healed, and, being constantly chafed by Tom's unkindness and petty naggings from Effie, she became more and more anxious to get away. So she turned her attention to nursing again, and made up her mind to advertise once more, and, if nothing came of it, to become a hospital nurse.

Her resolution had yet one trial in store.

Alf came home from Scotland, where he had formed one of a reading-party.

Mary had told him by letter what she intended to do, adding a request that he would not write to her about it. He had strictly complied, and did not allude to the subject when he came home, but his eyes followed her with a tender, wistful expression that she could not bear. She felt that she must have it out, so she asked him to come into the library one evening.

"Now, Alf," she began, in an airy tone, "I want to talk to you about my going away. Perhaps you think it a queer idea, but you know everyone is happier for finding their work. I remember how, as a chick, I used to envy the housemaid for being allowed to polish the grates. Now, you see, comes my turn to be useful, and I shall have a young mind to polish, which is better still. As for its being a disgrace and loss of position, you don't believe that nonsense. Even if I

did go because I was poor, I should be none the less a lady."

Alf was listening with a grave, sad face.

"So now congratulate me upon having found a vocation. That is to say, if it is found," she rattled on. "It is time that I 'got suited,' as Tom puts it. If I don't hear of something soon, I shall have to try hospital work."

Mary had avoided meeting her brother's eye. As she paused for a moment, he said, in a low, sorrowful voice —

"Oh! Mary."

"Why do you say that? You mustn't be prejudiced," she protested; and then she broke down, threw her arms round his neck, and burst into a violent fit of crying.

"Mary, darling, don't cry so," pleaded Alf, trying to soothe her. "Don't, childie Do tell me what it is."

"Oh, Alf, it has been so terrible," sobbed Mary. "No, I can't tell you. But I am so

lonely and miserable. Perhaps I should have stayed at home if you had been here—it is possible—but now I know I shan't be happy until I get away."

"Stay with us, dear Mary. We all love you, and will try to make you happy. It is not too late."

"Yes, it is," said Mary. "And I seem to have been forgetting that I am not the only, or even the chief, person to be consulted. I did not mean to be here as long as this."

Alf was startled by the bitterness of her tone.

"What has happened, dear?" he asked, anxiously. "Have you had some misunderstanding with Tom—with any of them?"

"Oh, no; except that he is mad at the idea of my going away. No, only I have learnt something lately. The blessing that Burns speaks of has been granted to me—

> Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us,
> To see ourselves as ithers see us.

If this useful knowledge has not been a blessing to me, at least it shall be a blessing to other people." Then she dropped her hard, bitter tone, and said wearily, "Now let us talk of something else, and while I am at home let you and me be as happy as we can together. Do you think you will be able to get on with me?" she added, falling into the old tone again.

"Mary, what have we done to you?" Why are you so unkind?"

The tears rose into Alf's eyes, and rolled down his cheeks, too.

Mary could not bear that. She threw her arms round him and kissed him again and again.

"Alf, I didn't mean to hurt you. It is because I am so unhappy. But I know you love me, and I won't say such things any more. Please do forget it."

Alf kissed her. Mary laid her head on his shoulder, and they sat there silently in the

gathering twilight until the beautiful harvest-moon rose and threw a band of light upon the wall. Then she drew her brother to the window, and as they stood watching a little band of cloud slowly crossing the moon, her face gathered a softer and happier expression, and, turning to Alf, she smoothed back the hair from his forehead and said —

"I think I forgot that I had you."

"Don't cut yourself off from us as if we didn't care for you. Stay with us, darling."

"No, no, I can't," said Mary, hastily; "but when you go to your first curacy, if you find nobody better, I will come to keep house for you."

With which promise Alf was obliged to be content.

CHAPTER II.

Let our old acquaintance be renewed.

MEANWHILE Mary's destiny was shaping itself some three hundred miles away.

In one of those pleasant houses south-west of London, with long gardens running down to the Thames, the future pupil, of whose existence Mary had begun to despair, was leisurely finishing her breakfast and studying the paper at the same time. She was a tall girl of fifteen, fair, with a pleasant, open expression, but features too heavy for beauty.

Two others were at the table—the mother, a middle-aged woman, of a rather common

type of stout comeliness, and an elder sister, in her twentieth year, the most noticeable, though the smallest of the three. She had no real claim to beauty—her lips were too thin, her complexion too pale—but she was much admired, nevertheless. Her eyes were a clear blue, her hair soft and waving, and her face had a piquancy of expression that was more taking than mere prettiness. Add to this a figure almost perfect, small, well-shaped hands and feet, and a lively coquettish manner, and it is not to be wondered at that the young lady possessed considerable powers of fascination. She had exercised them upon Mary Elwood in days of yore, when they were school-girls together, and won a romantic affection, which had not grown less, though they had not seen each other since they left school, a year and a half before, and both were bad correspondents.

To return to the breakfast table. My lady fair was toying with her engaged ring, looking

out over the garden, and smiling at her own thoughts—possibly they were of the giver of the splendid diamond that was revolving round her pretty finger; possibly of some other swain. Suddenly she recalled her mind to business.

"Let me see the paper, Alice. Mamma, it is quite time that we found a Mrs. General. I don't feel able to victimize myself during the interregnum."

"Or willing," suggested Mrs. Blake, smilingly.

"Or willing," repeated Maude, bowing to her mother with lively grace. "And yet I shouldn't like to see Alice grow up a thorough dunce."

"Oh, Maude!" remonstrated gentle-faced Alice. "You needn't call me a dunce. You shouldn't expect everyone to be as clever as yourself."

"My dear child, you have got as many brains as I have if you would but keep your

wits about you, and look alive, instead of dreaming."

"You are rather idle, my dear," added Mrs. Blake.

"I can't help it. I was made so. And you know you were idle at school, Maude, so you can't talk to me."

Maude made no reply. She was bending over the *Times,* but suddenly she looked up with an exclamation of astonishment, and said —

"Why, mamma, I believe I have found the very thing! Oh! how odd. Just read that governess's advertisement.—M. M. E. That must be Mary Elwood, and Brentham is where she lives. But I thought they were well off. What can make her go out as a governess?"

"Have I not heard you speak of her?"

"Yes, mamma. I was on the point of going to stay with her before we went abroad."

"Perhaps it was as well that you did not

go. I was not aware that they were that sort of people."

"I don't believe they are '*that* sort of people.' It is probably some silly freak; a case of a cruel step-mother, perhaps."

"Is she able to teach at all?" asked Mrs. Blake, doubtfully.

"Perfectly qualified, I should think. She is very clever; a great deal cleverer than I am," added Maude, glancing mischievously at her mother.

Mrs. Blake shook her head.

"Ah! you may shake your head, but it is too true. She beat me in everything at school."

"That was because you did not exert yourself."

Maude, having evoked this gratifying defence of herself, dismissed the subject with—

"Ah! there is no knowing what I might do, if I cared to try;" and went on, "I wonder if it would be nice to have Mary?"

"She might be a companion for you when Major Orres is away."

"Yes," returned Maude, meditatively, "and we might go out together. She is tall and dark, and her style is quite different to mine, so we shouldn't clash."

"And you really like her, Maude?"

"Oh! yes," returned Maude, carelessly, "as much as I like any of my friends. And she is devoted to me, which is a great point in her favour, *n'est ce pas, Maman?*"

"It is something," admitted Mrs. Blake, smilingly.

"She would make Alice work," continued Maude. "Child, don't sit gazing there with your mouth ajar. She will think you a specimen."

"Oh! Maude, I know I shan't like her. If she is as clever as all that, she will never have patience with me. Don't have her, mamma," pleaded Alice.

"We had better get you a nursery

governess at once," retorted Maude. "But we needn't discuss this at present."

That meant, Alice knew, that she was to have no say in the matter; so she determined to put in a parting word, and, being a girl of considerable sense, hit nearer the mark than she was aware.

"Listen a minute, mamma. Do find out why she is leaving home first. I dare say it is because she is disagreeable, and can't get on with her people. You wouldn't like a person like that here."

Maude's lip curled unpleasantly. It was very unpardonable in a younger sister to feel so strongly on a point which concerned her in quite a secondary degree, and insufferable that she should express herself with such "brutal frankness."

"I think you forget that you are speaking about my friend," she said.

"Alice shouldn't speak so impulsively," assented Mrs. Blake. "But," she continued,

in an apologetic tone, "there is something in what she says. I should like to know, dear, why she is leaving home."

"One can imagine a reason when there is a step-mother in the case, without any great fault on the girl's part," answered Maude, with her face averted, and in the frigid tone which seldom failed to bring her mother "to reason."

"If you have set your heart upon having your friend here, I don't want to oppose you. Perhaps you can find out a little more about it before we decide?"

"No doubt I can. Would you like me to write for you?"

"You may if you like, but don't commit me too hastily."

Maude had carried her point, and a fortnight later saw Mary Elwood arrive. Maude met her at the station, and Mary was so delighted to see her friend, that she nearly left umbrella and bag in the carriage.

"I never dreamt of such luck as this, old Maude," she said, squeezing her friend's arm as they went down the steps from the platform.

"Didn't you fancy you were coming to Warwick House again?"

"I suppose I did," said Mary, laughing; "for I turned so queer after I left Belchester. I thought it was from the motion of the train, until I remembered that I always had the same feeling when I was going off to school, and that I had never been on that line since I left. I feel very queer now, at any rate, Maude," she resumed, when a few minutes' drive had brought them to the house. "I think I will run away. Is your mother very formidable?"

"Not in the least. And she takes to anybody that I like, so she is prepared to receive you with open arms. Here she is."

Mary was received kindly by Mrs. Blake, and doubtfully by her pupil, and was then

taken up to a pleasant room on the second story, with a view over the river.

"There is a room downstairs that you can have if you prefer it," said Maude.

"I shall like this best. I sleep at the top of the house at home," answered Mary, who was nearly as conservative as the prisoner who was found lying *under* his bed and explained to the warder that he was accustomed to a four-poster. "This is charming. How pretty the river looks, and what splendid deodoras! Our evergreens are nothing to yours."

"I suppose they are fine?" said Maude, carelessly. "But I have been having some cut down. I would rather see the boats than the shrubs."

"Perhaps you expect the boats to bring somebody?"

"Oh, no. Percy seldom comes by water. I suppose you were thinking of him. Besides he is away now."

"Indeed, then I shall see more of you. Is it very selfish to be glad? I am afraid you feel dull when he is away."

Maude shrugged her shoulders.

"It is better than seeing too much of each other. It is such a bore to have to find something fresh to talk about."

Mary laughed.

"Then I am sure *I* mustn't bestow too much of my company upon you."

"I'll tell you when I am tired of you," said Maude, pinching her cheek. "Now take off your things, for you must be nearly starved, you poor child, after such a journey. I'll send you a maid."

"Oh, no; don't you know that I am going in for independence. That would be a poor beginning."

"You funny girl, was that your idea in running away from home?"

"I believe in self-help," replied Mary evasively, feeling it impossible to give Maude

a hint of the true state of the case; for, devoted as she was to her, Mary had never been able to talk to her upon any subject that lay near her heart.

"I can't say that I go in for it on my own account. But I am glad you have fallen in love with the idea. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good;" and, waving a kiss with the tips of her fingers, Maude left her.

Mary found Mrs. Blake by no means formidable, and she contrived to make friends with Alice in the course of the evening, and lay down to rest well pleased with the result of her experiment.

She made her appearance in good time next morning, and found Alice, early for once, waiting to fulfil her promise of showing her the garden before breakfast.

It was very different in style from that of Elwood Grange, but it had its own beauties, and Mary was charmed with it.

The long stretch of velvet lawn, the well-kept shrubs, gave an air of quiet and cultiva-

tion which was wanting in the more romantic garden at her own home. Then there was the river, often lively, always interesting; and on the other side, the towing-path bordered with willows, and a meadow backed by large trees, all, so far as the eye was concerned, forming part of the grounds.

"I do like your garden," she said, warmly.

"It's very nice just now, and there are lots of apples this year."

"Oh, shocking! Is that what you like best? What a beautiful laurel that is!"

"There were two, but Maude had the other cut down because it blocked out the river. Lots of our friends come past—Maude's friends, at least. There are not many that I care for. I hate army men."

"Why! Isn't your future brother-in-law in the army?"

"I suppose that is why I hate them. I can't bear Percy. Are you very shocked, Miss Elwood?"

"I am not easily shocked."

"I hardly ever like Maude's friends. I thought I should be awfully shy of you, and I didn't want you to come a bit; but I am very glad you did now."

Maude was watching them through the window.

"Look there," she said to her mother, as Mary and Alice came towards the house with their arms round each other; "wasn't I a true prophet, faithless mother mine?"

"She seems a very pleasant, ladylike girl," admitted Mrs. Blake. "We have yet to see what sort of a governess she will make."

"A very good one," said Maude, decidedly, feeling her judgment called in question. "I told you so before."

"You are generally right, dear. I hope it may be so in this instance. She certainly appears to be very fond of you."

CHAPTER III.

Will Fortune never come with both hands full ?

MARY found her new home answer all her expectations. Maude made herself very agreeable, and the two girls, both quick-witted, were excellent company. Alice was devoted to her, and Mrs. Blake took her cue from Maude and made much of her young governess.

Mary drove with them, visited with them, went into town from time to time to concerts, or to the opera, and was treated as one of the family.

The kindness with which she was surrounded brought out her best points, and

Maude found her a most delightful and good-natured companion, who, with a little management, might be put upon to any extent, and was inexorable only on the subject of lesson-hours. She had once or twice turned Maude out of the room by the shoulders, laughingly, but with the most serious intention, and was so persistent that it came to be an understood thing that during certain hours into the school-room there was "no admittance except on business."

The education of her pupil was left entirely in her hands, with the one exception that Mrs. Blake was determined that Alice should both paint and play the piano, which, as she had talent and inclination for neither, Mary considered a lamentable waste of precious time.

Perhaps at no period of her life had she been happier than during the first two or three months at the Blake's. She had found herself work, and it was more satisfying to

her than the *dilettante* method in which she had employed herself at home. She enjoyed the society of her friend ; she was treated with kindness and consideration, and subjected to none of the mortifications or privations which sometimes attend the lot of a governess.

Yet she suffered from occasional fits of home-sickness, and as weeks rolled by, and the novelty of her work wore off, her thoughts wandered still more frequently to the past, and to her home, and at times it came over her with a pang that her position was peculiar, and that she was out of place. Yet it never entered her mind to give up the course she had chosen. Until Alf wanted her she had determined to persist in it. And there were many things which made the thought of home unattractive. Besides unpleasant remarks which might be made in the house, there were the comments of Brentham, so that she was very willing to agree when Mrs. Blake asked if a fortnight at

Christmas would be a long enough holiday, as Alice had lost so much ground.

The fortnight was fairly pleasant. Alf was at home; that, in itself, was much. Then Tom was away part of the time in Westmoreland, on business—so he said—and while there contrived to spend a Sunday with Maurice Hughes. When he came home he was too much wrapped up in his own thoughts to think of plaguing his sister.

And on the way home she had been fortunate enough to pick up a convenient cold, which served as an excuse for shutting herself up in the house and refusing all invitations. Amongst these was one from Lady Stephens to dine at Aston Castle. Mrs. Elwood was very anxious that she should accept; but Mary was afraid that if she were well enough to go there it would be thought that she could go to other places, so she begged off, and Mrs. Elwood and Tom went alone. She was the

less disposed to regret her absence, when Tom remarked to her next day —

"Sir Humphrey asked after you. He had heard of your extraordinary proceeding. I fancy he thinks you a little" —and Tom tapped his forehead significantly.

A decided sense of relief mingled with her regret when she found herself once more travelling south.

Alice received her with open arms, and Maude was pleased to see her, and impatient to impart the news that Major Orres was coming to London in a few days.

Though Mary received the announcement with smiling congratulation, she did not feel sure that the presence of an engaged couple would be a boon to the other members of the household, especially to one who was not of the family. Moreover, she imagined that Mrs. Blake did not receive her quite as warmly as usual, but she was determined to overcome the habit of fancying such

things, and tried to dismiss the idea from her mind. In this case, however, there was some foundation for the impression. Mrs. Blake had not intended to show any want of cordiality, but she had been thinking that Mary would be very much in the way when Major Orres was coming constantly, and suggested as much to Maude in the course of the evening.

"Don't say anything to her, if you please," protested Maude, "or she will be off to-morrow. She is very useful to me, and she is amusing and different from other people, and I like her."

"I don't want to drive her away, my dear."

"Then don't put it into her head that she will be in the way. And if you have fears of another kind, you may dismiss them. She has her charms, of course, but so has your humble servant in her own line; and, if you will excuse the conceit, I think it is a line that pays better

than Mary's. Then, too, she is a governess, and that puts her quite out of the ranks as a rival."

"My dear, I shouldn't think of comparing you two," said Mrs. Blake, fondling Maude's hand, and gazing at her with loving admiration.

But though Mary was quiet and dignified in company, and always kept as much as possible in the background, and left the field open for Maude, with her captivating manner and ready wit, to which society acted as a touchstone—Maude never wasted anything on the desert air—Mrs. Blake could not fail to be aware that her young governess was eminently handsome, and she determined to run no unnecessary risk.

The following day she asked Mary to come round the garden with her while Alice, who was always a dawdle, got ready for a walk.

It was a bright frosty morning; each leaf and blade of grass was edged with tiny crystal spikes.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Mary, stooping to pick a leaf.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Blake, absently; and Mary saw that she had something on her mind, and wondered what was coming.

"I am afraid you and Maude will not see quite so much of each other now," began Mrs. Blake, in a fidgety, nervous manner.

"No, I mustn't expect a large share of her company."

"Major Orres is so often away that Maude will like to be as much with him as possible, and of course I wish them to be together, that they may know each other better. I merely mention this, my dear, because Maude is such a strange girl, and sometimes pretends she finds *tête-à-têtes* dull; but she must overcome that. Also, my dear," went on Mrs. Blake, as Mary made no reply, "you know how we enjoy your society in the evening; but perhaps sometimes it would be as well that we should be only the family party when

Major Orres is here. I dare say you will not object to a quiet hour now and then for reading or writing your letters. You will excuse my speaking about this?"

Mary knew that Maude was all in all to her mother, and that she herself held a place in Mrs. Blake's affection on the precarious tenure of Maude's liking for her. She roughly translated Mrs. Blake's speech into "Don't you be in the way;" but she only showed her feelings by the flushed cheek and haughty pose of her head as she listened to what was said, and replied quietly—

"I am much obliged, Mrs. Blake. I can assure you there is nothing I should so much dislike as to be in the way. I think it would be better that I should dine at lunch. I could join you in the evenings when you wished it."

Mrs. Blake had got confused and hot while delivering herself, but having made up her mind what to say, went through with it,

hoping that it was so neatly framed as not to give offence. She saw, however, that Mary had taken it amiss, and was most anxious to make her peace, the more so that she was afraid of getting into hot water with Maude.

"Pray don't do any such thing, my dear. I should be most grieved. I wish all to be as it was before, with the exception of that one little point; it is not often that Major Orres spends the evenings with us. Please forget what I have said. I am sure you are the last person to be in anybody's way;" and the poor lady looked so distressed that Mary relented, and said, with a reassuring smile —

"I will do whatever you like," whereupon Mrs. Blake answered, "That's a good girl;" and Mary consented to make it up with a kiss.

The conversation left her with an unpleasant feeling, and, as she did not know how frequent the Major's visits might be, or how long they might last, room was left for a

great deal of prefigured discomfort and fidgety fear of being *de trop*. She was consoled, however, to find that Maude did not think she would be in the way, and, indeed, seemed to find more pleasure in imagining the impression Major Orres would make upon Mary than even in the thought of seeing him herself.

He arrived a few days later, and Mary saw the two walking about the garden.

Alice kept out of his way until dinner-time; then she and Mary went into the drawing-room and Major Orres was introduced. Mary bowed coldly, and, sitting down a little outside the circle, talked quietly to Alice until dinner was announced, without so much as casting a second glance at the visitor.

At table she was silent and grave. Maude was amused, and thought she was shy. Once or twice she tried to draw her out, for Maude was quick at repartee, and enjoyed a skirmish. In these encounters Mary was generally

worsted ; yet she enjoyed them none the less, and was always ready for the fray. But to-night she seemed determined to keep herself aloof, and Maude could get no fun out of her.

"Who is this new governess?" asked Major Orres, after dinner, when Mrs. Blake had found an excuse for making herself scarce.

"What do you think of her?" said Maude.

"Well, one is hardly prepared to meet a governess with the manners of a duchess. She seemed very much at home with you, too. I thought I heard her call you by your Christian name."

"We were schoolfellows. She is the daughter of a banker in the North."

"Have they come to grief?"

"No, this is only a fancy. I believe her friends were against her leaving home. It is the very last thing I would do, but Mary never was like other people."

"I should have said so. Rather fiery, one might judge."

"I am sure she was quiet enough to-night."

"I dare say; but she looks as if she might develop dangerous energy, as they say of the storms."

"I am not afraid," said Maude, laughing. "She suits me better than anyone else. I can make a companion of her or a lady's maid. In fact, I can turn her round my little finger."

"Really!" said Major Orres, incredulously.

"She is devoted to me, always was," explained Maude.

"No wonder," returned the Major, gallantly.

Mary enjoyed the quiet evening with her pupil, and both found bed-time come too soon. She commissioned Alice to say good-night for her, but was not at all surprised to hear a tap at her door when she had been upstairs some little time.

"So you are happy now?" she said, as Maude came in and sat down.

Maude looked at her with amusement, laughed slightly, and said —

"Of course. Well, what do you think of him?"

Mary had seen a tall, distinguished-looking man, but she had not studied him sufficiently to be prepared with an opinion.

"I think you may be proud of him—that is to say, as far as appearance goes; for of course I can't judge of anything else at present."

"So far, so good," returned Maude, looking diverted again. "You are a joke, Mary. I don't believe you would swerve a hair's-breadth from truth if your life depended upon it."

"No; but to please you I might. I am quite sure that your gentleman combines every virtue, with all those graces of mind and manner which are calculated to win affection and inspire respect. Will that do?"

"What an odious individual he must be!

No, I am not sure that he is so very much overdone with virtue. He has broken two or three hearts, I fancy."

"Perhaps he will break yours."

"No fear. That is a commodity that I keep in my own hands. But Percy has many good points, and as one must be married, it is well to choose somebody endurable."

Mary always gave Maude credit for feeling more than she cared to show, but she was rather astonished at her way of remarking upon her lover, and at the coolness, almost satisfaction, with which she spoke of his breaking hearts. She wondered very often, as time went on, if the two would be happy together, but she had few opportunities of forming an estimate of Major Orres' character.

True, she was often in the room with him at meal-times, but he never entered into conversation, unless politeness absolutely demanded that he should address himself to her.

CHAPTER IV.

Truth hath a quiet breast.

A FEW months passed by. The gardens, erewhile white with snow, were now white with almond blossoms, and Mary, who pined for the green lanes, was fain to take long walks and explore any countrified bit of the neighbourhood.

One of these walks was memorable to Alice. Devoted as she was to Mary, and Mary to her, she always felt, as Mary meant she should, that Miss Elwood was her governess, and had never ventured to call her by her Christian name.

But one bright spring morning, as they

were walking on the other side of the river in the direction of Richmond Park, Alice plucked up courage to ask if she might call her "Mary," "because," she coaxed, "you are much more like my sister than Maude, and I love you ever so much."

A request so lovingly couched could not be refused, and permission was granted conditionally, to be retracted if lessons should suffer.

That, Alice averred, should never be, and she laughed and chatted gleefully, making full use of her privilege.

But there came a check to the delight of this walk. They stopped on the bridge on their way home, Alice interested in the unloading of a coal barge below, Mary waiting for her contentedly, now watching the busy men with their sacks, now the light ripples stealing lazily into the calm shallows below the river's brink.

Presently Alice looked round.

"Oh, Mary, there is Percy coming on to the bridge. Do let us go."

"Did he see you? We mustn't be rude."

"It doesn't matter. I can't bear him, and I don't care if he knows it," said Alice, taking Mary's arm in hers and dragging her along. "Do you like him?"

"I see no reason why you should dislike him," said Mary, who did not wish to give a direct "no."

"I dare say he will catch us up, as he isn't wanted. *You* must talk to him, for *I* shan't."

Alice's prophecy was quickly fulfilled, and a voice at her side said —

"I congratulate you, Alice, on having found your walking legs. Good-morning, Miss Elwood; I think this improvement must be due to you."

"We take long walks now. We have had a very pleasant one to-day on the other side of the river," said Mary.

"I suppose you don't often walk in the Home Park?" observed Major Orres, with a sly glance at Alice.

"We don't like the cows," replied Mary, ranging herself on her pupil's side.

"No, I should think not, when they turn all the dangerous animals out of Bushey Park into it. You wouldn't like it yourself," chimed in Alice, in the queer, brusque manner in which she treated her future brother-in-law.

Major Orres smiled, and contented himself with remarking —

"You don't lose much."

"We often walk in Bushey Park," said Mary. "I am very fond of the trees."

"I forget whether timber is fine in the North?"

"Not as a rule, I think. At least, if my childish recollections of Hampshire are correct, we have nothing to compare with the trees there."

"Oh, do you know Hampshire?"

"I stayed a few weeks once on the downs, ten or twelve miles from Winchester."

"Really. I know that part well. Did you ever come across Colonel Milresford?" he asked, with sudden interest.

"Uncle Horace!" exclaimed Mary.

"That's it!" said the Major, with emphatic satisfaction. "Do you know, I have been plaguing myself, as one does, to think where I could have seen you before. There is a wonderful likeness. So Horace Milresford is your uncle! I was staying there last autumn. I shall tell him, when I see him next, that I have met you."

"Oh, please don't!" exclaimed Mary, and, as Major Orres looked astonished, she explained, "He does not know that I am not at home."

"And perhaps would not rejoice at the news; is that so?"

"I am sure he wouldn't."

"Have you a special love for teaching?"

"I had not; but I enjoy it now."

Alice gave her arm a squeeze.

"Then why did you take up with it?" asked Major Orres, very seriously.

"Because I chose," answered Mary. "That really was the reason," she added apologetically, while her colour rose.

"I beg your pardon. It was an impertinent question."

Here Alice reminded her that they wanted some stamps, so they stopped at the post-office, and Major Orres pursued his way.

"I was so delighted to hear you snub Percy," said Alice, as they moved on again. "He had no right to be so inquisitive."

"I did not mean to be rude, but I did not know what else to say."

"It was just what he deserved."

"No, it was too abrupt," said Mary. "I set you a bad example. Don't follow it."

"I shall, to Percy, if I get the chance."

"Then he will think that I teach you bad manners."

But Major Orres bore no malice for what Alice termed a snub. On the contrary, he began to pay Mary such little attentions as a man might to a lady whose good opinion he is anxious to gain. They were too slight to be remarked by others, and to Mary they merely meant that he had ceased to think of her as "the governess."

Why a lady should be any the less an equal because she was a governess she could not understand, but she had felt a contemptuous toleration for the Major's prejudices, and her pride had matched his. Still, for Maude's sake, she felt that she ought to be on better terms with him, and now that he had come to his senses she was quite ready to be friendly.

It happened one day when Mrs. Blake was in town that he dropped in after lunch to see whether Maude felt inclined to ride. The sound of the piano attracted him to the draw-

ing-room where Mary and Alice were amusing themselves before lesson-hours by trying over new duets. Major Orres begged them not to stop, but Alice positively refused to play another note. She sat down in a corner with a story, and Mary took up a silk sock which she was knitting for Alf. After a few minutes she said —

"I wonder if I can help Maude? I think I will go and see."

"No, you shan't," said Alice; and she was off before Mary could speak.

Major Orres went to the table and pretended to amuse himself with a book.

"Who is reading this?" he asked presently, taking up a volume of Herbert.

"It is mine," said Mary.

"Do you care for this sort of thing?" he asked, carelessly.

"I began by reading it for the sake of the giver, but I ended by being interested in it."

Major Orres knit his brows and turned over

the leaves in silence. Mary's head was bent over her work, and he could not resist the temptation to look at the fly-leaf. "To my dearest sister, from A. E.," he read, in Alf's neat handwriting.

"Then do you believe in all this, Miss Elwood?" he asked presently.

"I can't say that I do in the way that the writer does, but I don't disbelieve it."

"I fancy I go further than you. I have no taste for these narrow theological views. But pray don't put me down with Jews, Turks, infidels and heretics," he went on, as Mary looked up in deprecation of the term "narrow," "because I don't receive everything I hear from the pulpit. I have the Poet Laureate on my side, you know —

> There lives more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds."

"Believe me, that is not a fair quotation."

"Isn't it correct?"

"Quite, so far as it goes. But you should

follow it with the next verse. I never was more surprised in my life than when I read the context for the first time."

"What is it? I forget."

"He fought his doubts, and gathered strength.
He would not make his judgment blind,

and so on. I was audacious enough to try to supply a better version for the people that quote the other lines."

"May I hear it?"

"I am afraid you mayn't, but it begins—

He pets his doubts."

"You are very hard upon me," said Major Orres.

Mary coloured and laughed.

"I forgot. I did not mean to make a personal application."

"It is not like you to be hard upon people. But I am afraid you pass some severe sentences upon me sometimes," he added, coming up and leaning against the mantel-piece in front of her.

"No really, I don't," she protested. "Why should I?"

"Why should you waste a thought upon me?" he replied with a forced laugh.

"I don't understand," replied Mary, bored by his persistence. "I was more in fun than anything else, if you mean about Tennyson. Oh, here is Maude!" she said, hearing voices in the passage.

"My dear Maude, you have been so long that Major Orres and I were beginning to quarrel."

"You little cat!" said Maude. "But so long as you are sweet to me, I don't mind your quarrelling with other people. Would you be so good as to put my room in order? I was obliged to hurry."

"Very well."

"Just fasten my veil first, there's a dear. And would it be too much trouble to find me a pair of warmer gloves? You know where they are. It is rather sharp this afternoon. I

am afraid I have kept you waiting, Percy," said Maude, with a pretty air of apology.

"Always at your service," replied the Major, watching the operation of pinning on the veil.

Maude looked very charming and elegant in her dark riding-habit, and her *fiancé* surveyed her with great complacency. But his eye passed to the anxious lady's maid behind her.

To pin on a veil to Maude's satisfaction was no easy task, but Major Orres undertook to act as looking-glass, and pronounced it perfection.

"Thank you. Now the gloves, dear."

Mary disappeared, and returned with them, then ran upstairs again to tidy Maude's room and watch the horses set off from the window.

CHAPTER V.

Here's metal more attractive.

MARY wondered what Major Orres had meant by saying that she judged him hardly, and could only conclude that he felt ashamed of having looked down upon her as a governess. She had thought him proud and supercilious, no doubt, but she was not his conscience-keeper, and when his faults ceased to incommode her, she had ceased to think of them.

She saw nothing of him for some weeks, and had never been left in the lurch to entertain him, so that he had no opportunity of explaining his meaning.

But one day he came in after lesson hours, and found Maude and Mary sitting together in the drawing-room.

"Don't go just this minute, Mary; I shall want you," said Maude. "Percy, can you wait until I finish this horrid note? Miss Elwood was kind enough to offer to write it for me, but it is almost more trouble to tell other people what to say than to say it oneself."

"I will wait your pleasure. Can I help?"

"No," said Maude, motioning him away with her hand. "Go and talk to Mary for a few minutes; she will tell you about it."

Mary had returned to her corner near the window, and taken up her knitting. She explained to Major Orres that some photographs sent by post had been lost.

"Very little chance of hearing of them again, my dear Maude," he said, shrugging his shoulders; "especially when they represent such an attractive subject."

Maude put up her hand to enforce silence, and the Major turned to Mary.

"I always find you reading poetry, Miss Elwood," he said, looking at a volume of Tennyson that she had laid down. "It seems to be your general study."

"No; I read it for recreation. I study upstairs."

"What were you reading just now?"

"I was looking over 'In Memoriam.'"

"Humph, for recreation," he said drily.

"For pleasure, then, as you are so particular about words."

"I know you study 'In Memoriam.' You can quote it from beginning to end, I believe, with paraphrase."

"Not quite," said Mary, laughing.

Major Orres occasionally assumed a bantering tone. Mary liked it. She felt more at home with him, for she missed Tom and his chaffing; and any approach to the same thing brought with it pleasant home-associations.

"And you understand it all!"

"No, not half of it thoroughly."

"I shall take a verse at random, and put you to the test."

"Oh, no; that won't do. It is like some people's handwriting that one can make out better at arm's length. I could never puzzle out a verse with the words before me. Besides, it isn't meant for that, and I don't like making a joke of it."

Major Orres closed the book.

"Why not?"

"Because it was written on the occasion of a real sorrow," she said, gently.

He looked for a moment into the sweet, serious face, then hastily averted his eyes, and stood gazing moodily out of the window. Suddenly he took up the book, and turned rapidly over the pages.

"Is this your property?" he asked; and, receiving an answer in the affirmative, hurriedly marked in pencil two passages, and gave her the book open at the page.

Mary looked at the title—"Maud"—then her eye glanced towards the other Maude at the far end of the room, and she smiled to herself, and began to read—

> The fancy flattered my mind,
> And again seemed over-bold,
> Now I thought that she cared for me,
> Now I thought she was kind,
> Only because she was cold.

And a little further on—

> I know it the one bright thing to save,
> My yet young life in the wilds of Time,
> Perhaps from madness, perhaps from crime,
> Perhaps from a selfish grave.

She did not look up at once, though she thought she understood his meaning, and felt for him from the depths of her heart. But she was shy of receiving such confidences, so she leaned her cheek on her hand, and looked out of the window with an anxious and troubled expression, as she wondered Does Maude really care for him? and felt that she could not answer yes with certainty.

Major Orres was watching her keenly, eagerly. He became impatient at her silence.

"Don't you think me worth saving?" he asked bitterly.

Mary slightly turned her head, but her eyes still wandered round and round the rough circle made by the branches of a catalpa.

Of course she thought any fellow-creature worth saving, and her heart ached for him. He must feel Maude's coldness keenly, she judged from his tone. But what could she do? How could she bring them together?

Slowly she turned upon him her large, soft eyes, full of compassionate sorrow, and said, shaking her head sadly —

"I wish I could help. But I don't see how."

Here Maude's voice was heard from the devonport, saying, as she directed her letter —

"Now I think I have mentioned everything, and you have been very good and quiet. No, there is still an address to find. I shan't be a moment; and then I want you to see what

I have said, Mary;" and Maude went out of the room.

Mary felt that things had been left at an unpleasant stage, and though she would rather Major Orres had not confided in her, now she must say her say.

"I know what you mean," she began hurriedly, "and I am very sorry. It used to make *me* very unhappy."

"What?" he asked surprised.

She could not answer the question put point-blank in that way. It was a delicate matter, and Mary wanted time to think. But she expected Maude's return momentarily.

"I mean—well, I used to think Maude did not care for me, because of her manner," she said hesitatingly; "but now—"

"I don't mean that. Are you blind?" he interrupted vehemently, adding to himself in an undertone, "Confound that wretched name!"

Mary blushed as Maude came in. She

felt uncomfortable about having held a conversation with Major Orres which her friend might not hear. Maude looked at her curiously as she handed her the note, and watched her as she read it. Mary became the more confused, feeling her cheeks burn, and knowing that Maude's eyes were upon her.

"Well, have I said everything?" Maude asked sharply, as Mary's opinion was long in coming.

"I think so. At least, I don't know what else you could say. Shall I fold it and put it with the letters?"

"Please," replied Maude; and Mary was glad to escape.

She found it hard to fix her attention during lesson hours. They began with Euclid, and her instruction was by no means as lucid as usual. Once or twice she leaned her head on her hands.

"Mary, darling, you're as tired as you can

be with trying to drum this stuff into my stupid head. Now, what is the good of it all? I am sure I could tell that those two triangles were the same size without all this bother. And you will certainly never get me over the asses' bridge. Let us do something nicer instead," said Alice, coaxingly, leaning her head against Mary's cheek.

Mary pulled herself together, physically and mentally. She drew her chair closer to the table and sat upright, putting one arm round Alice and pushing the paper in front of her.

"No, dear, it isn't tiring me. This is to teach you to think. Now we will master this one proposition, and you will find the asses' bridge much easier. If you have got a pair of scissors I will cut out the triangles."

Alice found the scissors, and, while the triangles were being cut and lettered, asked, drearily —

"Do you think anybody ever liked Euclid? Do you like it?"

"Not so much as some things. I am not patient enough to follow other people. I would rather find things out for myself."

"You not patient! I don't know who is, then."

In reply, Mary threateningly pointed a triangle at her.

"Now, come. When you have got a little further we will try some of the riders at the end of the book. Those are very nice."

But her pupil did not seem to appreciate the prospect, and asked, with a sigh —

"Do you very much want me to go on with Euclid?"

"Yes; I am sure it will do you good. You are not stupid, Alice, only a naughty, lazy child."

"It's very cruel," said Alice, mournfully; "but, if you really want me to, I will do my best. I believe I would do anything to please you," she continued, looking lovingly into Mary's face.

Mary kissed her, and then work proceeded. The troublesome problem was conquered, and Alice, with great satisfaction, tore the triangles into little bits.

"Now can we read English literature?"

"Isn't it German day?"

"Oh! but you are tired, and literature is so nice. We've got to Tennyson."

Mary thought she had had enough of Tennyson for one afternoon.

"Another day, darling. Bring the '*Jungfrau,*' please. Do you remember we got to the '*Lebe Wohl,*' where Joan says good-bye to her dear hills and her home before going away to join the army?"

"I wonder if she minded very much," said Alice.

"Nobody likes saying good-bye."

"I don't; and oh! I am so glad you are not going to take your holiday now. Were they awfully disappointed?" asked Alice, with a twinge of remorse for a selfish speech.

"They are just going to the sea-side, and thought it would be nice for me to go with them."

"And did you want to go very much?"

"Come, Alice, Miss Elwood will be obliged if you will begin to read."

"Oh, you horrid thing! But just tell me; did you want to go?"

"I am quite willing to wait until it is convenient to your mother."

"I believe I am very selfish to be glad. But I miss you so dreadfully. I wish you were my sister instead of Maude."

Mary put a hand over her mouth.

"Come, darling, let us get to 'Joan of Arc.'"

"Yes; but just one thing. You won't go away from us, will you, until I am 'finished?' Promise now."

"I mustn't promise, but I don't think I shall; certainly not to go anywhere else."

"That's right," said Alice, dancing on her

chair. "Oh, how stupid I shall be! I shall need an extra year's teaching, at any rate."

"And Mrs. Blake will say I am not fit to teach you, and find somebody else who will make you learn faster. But come, we must work an extra quarter of an hour to-day."

Lessons over, Mary went into her room and tried to arrange her ideas about the conversation of the afternoon. The more she thought of it, the more she felt that though she might and did sympathise deeply with Major Orres, she could not honour him for making a complaint of his betrothed to a comparative stranger. Then what did his last words mean? Mary knew that Maude was a flirt, and she had sometimes been pained and shocked by the lively accounts she was wont to give of her evening dissipations and the attentions she had received from now this person and now that. But that Major Orres should take her into con-

fidence on the subject of Maude's delinquencies was highly distasteful to her.

She had learnt to know Maude better than she did when she came, and could no longer close her eyes to the fact that she was self-centred and wanting in real affection. But she bore the name of friend, and, besides, there was still a strange attraction that held Mary to her. I hardly know what it was, but something, at any rate, was due to the fact that Maude always acted the part of the ruling spirit. This was something new in Mary's friendships, and she, who so often kicked against constituted authority, found a sense of rest and a pleasure in bending to a self-chosen yoke and letting her friend play at governing, which Maude did so prettily and gracefully that she could but admire her and laughingly submit.

From this time forward Mary was careful that no accident should leave her alone again

with Major Orres. She was frankly kind to him, but he fell back into his old manner, almost ignoring her presence, though Mary fancied that he watched for a chance of speaking a word to her alone. "Probably," she thought, "he has repented of letting his feelings run away with him, and wishes to tell me so." But she did not consider it incumbent upon her to allow him to relieve his mind at the expense of her own embarrassment, and the opportunity was not given.

CHAPTER VI.

> It was not I
> That curved these lips into this subtle smile,
> Or gave these eyes their fire, nor yet made round
> This supple frame.

BUT the proverb says, "Where there's a will, there's a way," and though an opportunity is not given, it may be taken nevertheless.

Mary was sitting in the schoolroom, a few weeks later, waiting for Alice to come to lessons. It was not quite ten, and the young governess was by no means impatient. The window was open, the birds were singing in the garden, and the scent of newly-cut grass stole in on the soft air. On her lap

lay a letter. It was from Gertie, telling of the festivities in honour of Tom's coming of age, and giving a description of the sea-side place where they were all staying. A smile played upon Mary's lips at the thought of the loving postscript—"I wish you were here. We should enjoy it ever so much more."

Mary echoed the wish. The sea had a magnetic attraction for her. From childhood it had been the great theatre of her dream-life, though she knew little of it in reality, having only spent an occasional summer month at the sea-side. But in imagination she had ridden on its waves in the storm, taken long expeditions to explore its mysterious depths, played with the fishes, and spent ecstatic holidays in the rock pools. That had been a red-letter day when "The Water-babies" first fell into her hands. She devoured the story as a description of home-scenes, chuckling over the satire as she read

it for the first time, but reading it again and again simply for the beautiful sea-life.

She had once seen an aquarium, and had gone brimful of delighted expectation, but what with the artificial holes, the impure atmosphere, and the vulgar sightseers, she felt it to be a wicked caricature, a hateful intrusion into the sacredness of her world, and came away nearly crying, and vowing never to enter another.

The river had also its place in her affections; she had loved to fancy herself an "Undine" lying at anchor in the clear, sparkling Brent, while the wavelets rippled over her, and the changeful murmur of the flow soothed and pleased her. Only at rest, though, when there were no shipwrecked sailors to be saved—at such times she would away to the sea.

As Mary watched from her window the swiftly-flowing Thames, the old child-fancies came to mind, and she began to plan how

a cockle-shell, no, a mussel-shell—for there were some at the bottom of the garden—would carry her to surprise Gertie by answering her letter in person. A tap at the door disturbed her reverie. It opened, but instead of her pupil, Major Orres appeared. He came forward with perceptible embarrassment.

"I am intruding," he said, his eyes seeking hers. "But I could not find Maude anywhere."

"She is tired after last night. I will tell her you are here," said Mary, rising.

"No, no," he said hurriedly; "wait a moment. I have something I must say to you."

Mary looked at him deprecatingly. "No, don't talk to me about that. It can do no good, and I would rather not," she begged.

"You must hear the truth. I cannot keep it from you. I am not insensible to the ties of honour and duty; but it is of no use—love will not be bound. *Do* look at me!"

Mary, perfectly white and rigid, had turned away her head, and stood with her hands

tightly clasped and her arms pressed to her side, striving to master the excitement that deprived her of speech. Now she turned upon him like a lioness at bay.

"You—you, engaged to my friend!—you dare to make love to me, and in this house! What do you think of me?"

She looked to the door, but Major Orres anticipated her, and planted himself before it with reckless determination.

"No, you shall not leave me like that. You shall hear me. I am not responsible for this. You have stirred me to the very depths, as Maude never did. From the first day I saw you I knew that I must either hate you or love you. I was so far alive to my obligations that, I tell you plainly, I wished to hate you. I tried to hate you, but I could not, and I love you. Was it my fault?" he added, in a tone of imploring entreaty.

Mary was standing, panting and breathless, with her flashing eyes full upon him.

"It *was*. You might have spared me this pain—this shame. Let me go."

"No, not in this way."

"Will you oblige me to listen to you?"

Major Orres opened the door for her, and stepped back with a gesture as proud as her own.

Once outside the door, Mary fled as if a fiend were behind her, upstairs, along the passage. She burst open the door of Maude's room, and, flinging herself on the floor, hid her face in Maude's lap, and sobbed violently.

Maude was in her dressing-gown, sitting on the sofa with her hair down her back. She was looking over a note that she had been writing to the dressmaker, and was startled by the sudden entrance and annoyed at the interruption.

Besides, she hated a scene, and felt, with righteous indignation, that Mary was now old enough to control her feelings. But Mary's

distress was evidently great, and Maude felt some movings of sympathy.

"What is the matter, child?" she said, kindly, laying her hand caressingly on Mary's head.

"Oh, Maude, I wish I were dead!"

That was all she could obtain, and Mary became more and more convulsed with sobbing.

Maude grew impatient, and it occurred to her with a shock that the blue silk facing of her dressing-gown was being wept upon. She tried gently to remove it from under Mary's head, saying at the same time—

"Come, Mary; I shall get quite cross. Do hold up your head, and tell me what is the matter."

Mary stopped crying, and tried to realize her position. She had acted upon the impulse of the moment in coming there, and now the difficulty of explaining her behaviour met her. If possible, Maude should never

know what had taken place. But how to satisfy her consistently with truth?

She raised her head, and said quietly —

"I must go home, at least, to the sea-side, Maude, to-morrow. They wrote to ask if I could join them there, you know. I was quite willing to give it up before, but now something very sad has happened, and I must go at once. And you will not ask me about it, but speak to Mrs. Blake for me, for the sake of our friendship, Maude," she added, with beseeching earnestness.

"I am very sorry," said Maude, passing her arm round Mary's neck, and at the same time casting a look of distress at a tear-stain on her silk. "I suppose you must really go to-morrow? Or could you possibly wait until after the picnic? I shall have to take Mrs. Bamfield if you don't, and you know I can't bear her."

"Oh, no, no!" said Mary; "it is quite impossible. I must go at once."

Maude looked at her with surprise.

"It is very strange. I suppose you had a letter from home this morning?"

"Yes," said Mary, colouring painfully, for she was sensitive to the least shade of untruth.

"There is something wrong," thought Maude, but she continued without change of tone, "Then the sooner I am dressed the better," and rang the bell for her maid. "I will let mamma know, and you can begin to pack now, if you like. Percy will be here before I am ready, and revenge himself by being as dull as ditch-water if I try his patience too severely. Give me a kiss, and go and make your face presentable."

Mary rose and kissed her, but her confused manner confirmed Maude in her suspicions that she had not been on the right tack as to the cause of Mary's agitation.

She finished dressing with more alacrity than usual, knelt at the bedside for a few

moments, while her mind was busily engaged in conjecturing what could have taken place, then hurried downstairs.

"Mamma, something has gone wrong. I don't know what it is, but Mary has had a letter from her people, and wants to go to them to-morrow. I said I was sure she might."

"My dear, it is very awkward."

"That can't be helped. She was in a great state of mind. I thought she would never stop crying. Why, this is Percy's writing. Has he been here?"

"Yes; he left that note."

Maude opened it and read—

"I called this morning to tell you that I am obliged to run down to Scotland for a few days. It is a horrible nuisance, and, as you can imagine, I am *au désespoir,* but I wish you a pleasant day on the river, nevertheless."

Maude folded the note, put it back in its envelope, and stood perfectly still, with an increasing compression of her thin lips.

"When did he call?" she asked, abruptly.

"About nine o'clock, I believe; no one was downstairs. I am sorry for you, dear."

"I can exist. But, mamma,"—Maude's tone carried a slight apology for starting what must seem to Mrs. Blake an entirely irrelevant subject—"you had better look out for a new governess. It is what Mary will probably wish."

"I shall be sorry to do so. Poor girl, I must find out what is the matter! You know Alice is devoted to her, and is getting on so nicely."

"You had better not ask any questions. She has brothers, you know. They may have been getting into mischief. People don't like those things talked about. I know she won't come back."

"It is very unsatisfactory."

"Amateurs always are," replied Maude, shrugging her shoulders.

"You might remember, Maude, that it was simply to please you that I engaged her."

"So I do, mamma, with becoming penitence. In proof whereof, I will leave you to choose for yourself next time. Now I had better go and see what she is doing."

Maude was not angry with Mary; and it was a question whether she was as much annoyed with Major Orres for flirting as for driving away her useful, good-natured companion. She herself had no scruple about flirting with anyone who came in her way, and she measured Major Orres by her own bushel. But she put implicit trust in Mary's honour and the genuineness of her high-flown notions, as she considered them, and judged it quite possible that some foolish, unmeaning gallantry, of which she herself would have

made light enough, might account for her distress.

"Silly girl!" thought Maude, "she need not have made such a fuss about it;" but as Mary would be so ridiculous, Maude was of opinion that she had better go away.

She found her trying in vain to console Alice.

"You promised—you promised," was all the child could say between her sobs.

"Alice, darling, if you love me," pleaded Mary at last, "don't make me more miserable than I am."

Alice looked up into Mary's harassed face and threw her arms round her neck, then, seeing Maude, she gave Mary a sorrowful kiss and went off to her own room.

"When shall you come back?" asked Maude.

"I can't come back," returned Mary, shaking her head.

"I am sorry to hear that, but don't distress

yourself so, my dear child. We shall miss you, but there is nothing gained by breaking one's heart over what can't be helped. I have made it all right with mamma; so you can begin to pack at once."

Mary left the next morning, and Major Orres ventured back in some fear and trembling towards the end of the week. His reflections in the interval had been by no means pleasant, and he bitterly repented of having acted in such a rash and ill-advised manner, for if he could not win Mary he would be sorry for several reasons to lose Maude.

His lady received him with just enough coldness to put him on his best behaviour, and, anxious to ascertain how much she knew or guessed, he hazarded a remark about Mary.

"So you have lost Miss Elwood. Did she go off in a huff? Do you know why she left?" he asked, with studied carelessness.

"I believe I know why she left," replied Maude, raising her blue eyes for a moment to

his face. "And it appears to me that the less said about it the better."

"By Jove! you're a cool hand," exclaimed the Major, mentally; and he was sincerely thankful that the subject was dismissed so easily.

CHAPTER VII.

I never did repent for doing good,
Nor shall not now.

MARY arrived at her destination in the evening after a long, wearisome journey, and found Tom waiting for her at the station. The wind was high; it was raining fast, and she clung to her brother's arm while he tried to hold an umbrella over her, and they struggled along through the cheerless, deserted streets of the little village.

It was an inauspicious welcome on the part of the elements.

At last they reached the house. Mary

gave her dripping cloak to the landlady, and went upstairs to the drawing-room.

All seemed pleased to see her, but Mrs. Elwood grumbled a little about the awkwardness of receiving her at such short notice, and the girls were more eager in asking why she had come off in such a hurry than in giving her a hearty welcome.

She was glad to escape to bed, and was so tired and worn out that she was soon asleep.

"You don't look well, Mary," remarked Mrs. Elwood, when she came down next morning. "I suppose you felt the need of a change?"

"I think it will do me good," said Mary, colouring, for she felt the answer to be an evasion.

Mrs. Elwood drew her own conclusions, but said no more.

"What do you girls mean to do this morning?" asked Tom.

"I promised to bathe with the Marshes,"

said Effie. "Will you come, Mary? We shall be glad to have someone who can swim. You can, can't you?"

"Like a fish out of water," growled Tom, who held ladies' aquatic performances in contempt.

"I can swim a little, but not in the waves. I would rather not bathe, if you don't mind. I'll come if you want me very much," she added, listlessly, seeing her sister look annoyed.

"I should be sorry for you to bathe on our account. I daresay we shall do very well."

"I think it is too rough, Effie," said Mrs. Elwood, going to the window, and seeing that a strong swell was rolling in with large white breakers.

"You are looking towards the rocks, mamma. It is much more sheltered in the bay. I can't disappoint those girls."

"Then be very careful. I shall be glad to see you safely out of the water."

"Calm your fears," said Tom. "Effie never ventures in above her ankles; and her main object is to wet her fringe."

"You are very rude, Tom. And you know nothing about it."

"Don't I? These glasses could tell a tale," replied Tom, pointing to a pair of binoculars.

"You shan't have them again," said Effie, taking possession.

"Once was quite enough. I am going out after breakfast to see if we can get some sort of trap to take us to Darlham Castle this afternoon, unless you prefer a sail. If anyone has a fancy for being 'rocked in the cradle of the deep,' now's the time. Nobody speaks; then I suppose you would all like a drive. Who will come with me? Gertie, I suppose you go off with your bottle? I shall have Cruikshanks down upon you. Polly, have you anything better to do?"

"No, I can come."

Mary was anxious to dispel, if possible, the

idea that anything special had happened to make her leave the Blakes so suddenly; so, during their walk, she roused herself to talk to Tom in her old bantering way. The general surmise was that she had quarrelled with Maude. This she knew, and it was hard to bear; but she would not definitely contradict it, lest the truth should leak out.

The quest was unsuccessful, for the one waggonette in the village was engaged, and the only thing that could be heard of was a dog-cart, at an inn half a mile off.

"A dog-cart won't hold us all," deliberated Tom, as they walked back in the direction of the shore.

"I don't care about going," said Mary, hastily.

"Oh, yes, you like driving. I am sure the mater would as soon stay at home."

"But I would rather. I really don't care to go."

"'Don't care' got hanged, and hanging

was too good for him," snarled Tom. "What's the matter, Polly?" he said, abruptly, slipping his arm through hers. "I am sure there is something wrong, old girl," he added, kindly.

Mary could not say "nothing." She turned away her head, and made a just perceptible repellant movement, hating herself for it the while.

Tom felt rebuffed, and withdrew his arm.

"I am quite ready to drive, if you want a fourth," she said, presently.

"You can please yourself," returned Tom, coldly.

"I think I will see what Gertie is after," said Mary, as they reached the top of the cliff.

They parted. Tom went on in search of the dog-cart, and Mary walked slowly along the sand towards the rocks, feeling as miserable as possible.

Her being out of sorts had been no pretence. The strain and excitement of the

last two days, and now the necessity for concealment and repression, was telling upon her.

And a more immediate trouble preyed upon her mind. She had repulsed kindly-meant sympathy. Sydney's words came back to her—for the wound had never been healed—and she wondered what Tom was thinking of her. Wishing her far enough, no doubt; and Mary echoed the wish.

Yes, to be away, but where? The result of her first experiment was not encouraging. Oh, for some quiet resting-place where she might forget everything for a little while! But where could it be found? Where but in the grave? And young life was too strong in her for the thought of death to be welcome. Besides, what security had she that the fate which cursed her life now would not pursue her into that "undiscovered country?"

After walking for a mile or more along the

sand, she reached the rocks, and scrambled over them, choosing the most difficult ways, and trying to avoid the crowded mussels that were being crushed under her feet. Beyond her she saw a projecting rock, round which the waves were dashing, and made towards it. But, on the way, a pool of peculiar beauty caught her eye, and a natural impulse led her to stop. From the further side the rock, pink with coralline, shelved gradually into the water, and, below her, a wall fringed with the emerald zostera sheered down to a delicious pebbly bed.

She stooped down to look into it; but her mind was pre-occupied and impatient of the beauty, and she threw herself down on the honey-combed rocks, closed her eyes, and gave herself up to her own thoughts. Very bitter thoughts they were, and in her heart Mary, like Job, cursed the day which had brought her into the world to be a burden to

her family and a means of injury to her friends—so she summed up the result of her existence. Maurice had said that God's will was love, and he believed it. She wondered what he would say if he was in *her* position. She had been brought into the world by no desire of her own. She had had no voice in determining her own natural character. Whatever blame might attach to her for giving way to her temper at home, at least conscience acquitted her of disloyalty to her friend. And her beauty, which had attracted Major Orres, she had not sought it. Others might envy it, but to her it had only been a source of trouble, and she wished she had been made ugly. Maurice would say she was kicking against the pricks. So she was. She knew it, and she did find it hard; but what else could she do?—unless she tried to reach a state of callousness—a wretched alternative, with no security against a terrible reaction.

She was startled by a crackling of shells behind, and, looking round, saw Effie picking her way towards her.

"I have found you at last. How could you come along here? It is enough to cut one's boots to pieces."

"I didn't know you wanted me, and I don't care about cutting my clodhoppers."

"You are to go back at once. Tom has got something he calls a Rabshakeh dog-cart."

"Ramshackle, don't you mean?"

"I heard what he said," returned Effie, who disliked to be corrected. "We are to start directly after lunch, and it is a good two miles to the house. Where is Gertie?"

"I haven't seen her. Did she come this way?"

"Yes; she had Gosse and a bottle with her. Let us go a little further, and call. How quickly the tide is coming in!" exclaimed Effie, after scrambling a few yards.

"And how horribly slippery this seaweed is! Will you go on, and I'll wait here?"

"Very well," replied Mary. But she had only gone a few steps before Effie cried —

"Why, there's Gertie's hat! She is poking about in a pool over there. And I do believe she is surrounded;" and she hurried after her sister in great excitement.

It was so. Mary shouted as soon as she came within hearing distance, and Gertie's smiling face popped up, and she came towards them, holding out her bottle in triumph. But her smile changed to a look of blank dismay when she saw that the stones by which she had crossed an hour before were now under water. Mary rushed along until she stood close by her, but separated by a deep passage several feet under water. The rock on which Mary stood was the higher, and its side offered no foot-hold.

"What must I do?" shrieked poor Gertie.

"You can't get over here. Can you come through the water?"

"Mary, I *daren't!* Look at the waves! I know I shall be drowned. I am so frightened!"

"You must, Gertie. Be quick! Make a rush, and scramble over anyhow. Never mind getting wet. I'll be at the other side, and help you up. Now!"

In obedience to Mary's commanding tones, Gertie dragged her shaking limbs to the side of her rock. But there had been deep pools amongst those slippery, wrack-covered stones when she had crossed before in some fear and trembling, and now the waves went over them. She could not muster courage to make the attempt, so she sat down where she was, and began to cry like a child.

Mary was at her wit's end.

"Run, Effie, and tell them to bring a boat and ropes."

"You run the fastest, Mary. I'll stay with her."

"Then you must jump across. Now, before I go."

"What's the good of two people being drowned? I am near enough. How can you be so foolish?"

"Don't you see that she is frightened out of her senses? Don't lose time. Everything depends upon you;" and Mary sprang across and scrambled round the rock to where Gertie was sitting.

Effie was off like a shot.

"What were you doing to get into such a hobble, you silly little thing?" said Mary, pressing her handkerchief to Gertie's cheeks.

"I forgot the tide. I couldn't see it coming in from where I was. How good of you to come to me! But I wish you hadn't."

"Little goose! Did you think I should leave you to sit here alone, and make 'eye-water in the sea' before the time?"

"I know we shall both be drowned, Mary. And it will be all my fault," sobbed Gertie.

"I don't mean to be drowned," returned Mary, cheerfully; and she got up to look about her, and see if there was a chance of crossing.

"I think we must make up our minds to wait until Tom brings a boat," she said, coming back to Gertie. "Let us go and explore our island?"

They went to the highest point and looked round.

"What waves!" exclaimed Gertie.

"Wonderful!" replied Mary, who was rapt in admiration, for the "spring of love" called forth by her sister's danger had opened her heart to the beauty. "Look, there is a rainbow on the spray. Yes, there it is again! And see how that grand fellow comes riding in! He's in no hurry, not a bit impatient; but doesn't he know his strength! And look at the back-wave dancing out to meet him!"

"Yes; but how they break over that point! Fancy if we were there!" said Gertie with a shudder.

Finding the waves a dangerous topic, Mary proposed sitting down again.

"How bright it is overhead," said Gertie.

"Yes; but there was a terrible storm last night. I thought of the sailors."

"I shall think more about them after this," replied Gertie, "if we—"

Here she stopped; but Mary knew the meaning of the unfinished sentence.

"Don't the seagulls scream!" she said hastily. "And look, there is a guillemot, that black bird with white breast and shoulders, flying towards us."

Gertie got up to see better.

"There it is. But how near the waves are! Just look at that place where you jumped."

Mary gave a hurried glance, and saw that the water had risen perceptibly.

"Never mind the waves at present. Show me what you got. Where's the book?"

"Somewhere close by. I don't suppose we shall want it any more," said Gertie, despondingly.

"Nonsense. Let us look for it."

Book and bottle being found not far off, Mary inspected the treasures, and tried to identify them.

"'It's an ill wind that blows nobody good,' so suppose we set the fishes at liberty," she said. "Put them into this pool."

"They'll be better off than we are. It will soon be covered."

"Not for a long time yet! Come along, I am going to tell you some stories;" and Mary drew Gertie down beside her into such a position that she could not see the water.

Wonderful tales they were, of ambitious limpets left high and dry in their exalted position, and pathetic stories, such as would have roused the Irish blood, of evictions by

the cruel hermit crab. She made Gertie laugh, too, by describing how he asked the anemone to keep house for him, and helped her to remove, when he "shifted" to a new abode. It was as good as "The Water-babies," Gertie averred; but Mary hardly knew what she was saying as she talked away, afraid of stopping for a moment, and keeping an eye upon the water, which had made considerable advance.

She was looking landward, but she heard the roar of breakers behind, and it was no surprise to her when a larger wave than usual sent a shower of spray not far from them.

Gertie started to her feet.

"Mary, the water is close to us, and there is no boat in sight."

"They have not had time to reach us. We must make up our minds to a wetting. It will be only like bathing with our clothes on."

"Do you think they will come?"

"I hope so," said Mary; but she was beginning to realize that there was no certainty about it. "At any rate, you shouldn't give up *yet*," she went on, reproachfully. "Let us sit down a little longer. Presently we will stand, because we want to keep ourselves as dry as we can."

"Oh! Mary, why *did* you come?"

"Silly little sister, what else should I do?"

"I know we shall be drowned. Oh! Mary, pray."

"I can't. It would be too mean to begin to pray now. You can. I must take my chance."

Gertie broke out into sobbing petitions —

"Oh! Lord, have mercy upon us. Oh! Lord, save us. Oh! Lord, forgive our sins, for Jesus Christ's sake. It is hard to die, Mary."

"Yes it is, when it comes to the point.

Though this morning I thought it was harder to live. But I could bear it better now. You do love me a little, Gertie?"

"Mary!" cried Gertie, clinging to her. "You know I love you dearly. We all do. You didn't doubt it?"

No answer came.

"Was that why you went away?" asked Gertie, suddenly, as the thought flashed upon her.

Still no answer.

"How could you think such a thing? Do you know, mamma cried so the evening after you had gone. She said it seemed as if you had lost all affection for us."

Gertie stopped, for Mary had buried her face in her hands. A light had fallen on the past, and the keen self-reproach of that moment made it one to be remembered throughout her life.

It was Gertie's part now to act the comforter.

"Mary, darling Mary, don't think so much about it. I always knew you would come back to us. It will be all right now. Oh, take care!"

A large wave broke and rushed up the rock, nearly reaching them.

Mary had forgotten the danger of their position. She rose mechanically, and, stepping back a little, stood with her eyes fixed on the breakers, but without seeing them, while Gertie, awed by the expression of deep pain on her sister's face, clung to her silently.

"Gertie, if we are spared, they shall never think again that I don't love them. And if you should be saved, and I should die, tell them that I always loved them, but that I thought they would be happier without me. I know I was wrong now. Ask them to forgive me."

"Happier without you! What could make you think so? It must have been something special, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Mary, after a moment's silence. "I was sure that my wretched temper must have made you hate me, and I overheard something which confirmed me in thinking so." She paused. "I was too proud to stay at home after that."

"Oh, Mary! I wish we had known. We could so easily have set it all straight. How miserable you must have been."

"I deserved it all; I brought it on myself. Don't cry, darling. We must make the most of our strength."

"Will they come?" said Gertie, straining her eyes to look over the rocks.

"The longer we can hold out the more chance of our being saved. We will make a good fight for life. Let us sit down on this high bit and turn round the other way. Never mind being wetted. We are safe for some time to come."

They sat there with their arms round each other.

"Gertie, you *do* know that I love you! Give me one kiss."

"You didn't mean to let me doubt that, when you were ready to give your life for my sake. I understand better now, Mary, what Christ did for us."

"Don't, Gertie, don't!"

"I was thinking of the text—'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.' And He laid down His for His enemies! Oh, Mary, if we live I think I shall love Him more than I ever did before."

Mary was silent. Again a light had flashed on the past—a terrible light.

"For His enemies!" One upon another crowded memories of hard words, harder thoughts.

"Oh, God, forgive me!" she groaned, in an agony of repentance.

Gertie did not venture to speak. Mary's trouble was too great to be approached by

word or gesture. For some time they sat there in silence—Gertie divided between sympathy for her sister and anxiety about the advancing tide; Mary with her eyes fixed on the distant sea-line, and an expression of bitter self-reproach on her white face.

Suddenly a large wave splashed Gertie, and she seized her sister's arm.

Mary turned round, and forced a smile. Then she looked at the water.

"Pin this to your hat with a brooch, dear, and let it fly out in the wind," she said, taking off her white scarf. "The boat will come from the other side of those rocks, and this will be a signal. I shall sit and cling to the rock, and you must hold on to me."

"No, Mary, *you* mustn't sit. Oh, I know we shall both be drowned!"

"Gertie, that is naughty. You must be brave. Every minute makes it more likely that they will come. Give me one more kiss."

Gertie clung round her neck and kissed her again and again.

"Now stand up and look out for the boat. Hold tight."

A huge breaker followed her words. The spray dashed in Mary's face, and the water streamed over the rock. Gertie began to cry, and shook all over.

"Gertie, if you go on in this way we shall both be drowned," said Mary, in a tone of severe remonstrance. "For my sake you must control yourself. You can if you like. We shan't have such a large wave again for some time. One more kiss, and then stand steady. And if you speak, don't be afraid if I don't answer."

Gertie stooped, and their lips met in what both thought was a farewell kiss.

Soon the waves came fast and furious, and it required all Mary's strength to cling to the rock. She began to realize that she would

not much longer be able to regain her breath after the heavy breakers which dashed against her, but, feeling Gertie's grasp slacken, she mustered all her strength to call, "Hold tight."

The next wave almost stunned her, and she feared that she could not keep her place against such another.

But a momentary lull followed. Mary was about to take advantage of it, to whisper good-bye, when she heard a faint "Here" from Gertie, and the next moment recognized Tom's cheery shout —

"Can you swim, Polly? We dare not bring the boat nearer."

She could not answer, so he seized a rope and swam to them. He tied it round Gertie's waist and called to the man to draw her in; then, seizing Mary by the hair, swam with her to the boat.

"Well, Polly, you *are* a brick after all,"

said Tom, warmly, when he had pulled her in.

But Mary had fallen heavily, and was lying, to all appearances, lifeless.

He unfastened her collar, wrapped his coat round her and began to rub her limbs.

"Lend us a hand with the boat," said the man, "and set t'other lady to roob. The sooner we get 'em back the better."

Gertie rubbed as if her own life depended upon it, and Mary was not long in showing signs of returning consciousness.

"All right. Coming round," shouted Tom, to the anxious group on the sands, as soon as he came within hearing distance.

Gertie was able to walk, and was helped out of the boat and sent home with Effie, while the man called to his mates to aid in carrying Mary on shore.

"Oh, my dear child," cried Mrs. Elwood "Thank God you are safe."

"Ay, she'll soon coom aroond. Give her a soop brandy," said one.

"Diven't. Ye mun see the doctor first," protested the boatman, who had been watching her anxiously. "She's not a canny look aboot her. Hap her oop in them blankets, and had awa' to the hoose with her."

CHAPTER VIII.

This day
Shall change all griefs and quarrels into love.

GERTIE was soon herself again, but Mary lay for many a long day in extreme danger, tossing in the wild delirium of brain-fever.

Alf had been sent for at once, and she had no lack of loving, anxious nurses.

At last the fever seemed to wear itself out. And one morning Alf, sitting by the bedside, caught a faint whisper of "Dear Alf," and, looking round, saw Mary's eyes fixed upon him with a smile of recognition.

He was afraid of exciting her, and only

ventured to return a quiet smile, telling her to try to sleep. Mary obediently closed her eyes, and soon fell into a refreshing slumber.

When she awoke, Alf stooped to kiss her. Her fingers closed round his, and she lay looking up into his face with an expression of the utmost content.

"Have I been ill?" she asked.

"Yes, darling, but you will soon be well now, I hope."

"I want to get well," replied Mary, slowly, "because I have been such a trouble to you all. Now I want to be—you know—the other thing—" She could not think of the word.

"A comfort," supplied Alf.

"I want to tell you about it—all of you—no, not Effie, because—because—"

He laid his hand on her lips.

"Don't talk now, darling. Tell us another time. You must think only about getting well at present."

"To-morrow then?" she pleaded.

"Yes, to-morrow, if you are better."

Mary's first words, after she had said good-morning to Alf next day, were —

"Now may I tell you?"

He saw that it would be better for her to unburden her mind, and replied —

"Yes, I will call them."

"Not Effie, because she is such a friend of Miss Forrest's."

The first to come in was Tom. He crept gingerly up to the bedside, and stooped to kiss her, hardly venturing to touch her cheek with his lips, lest he should do her a mischief.

Mary smiled at his anxious face, and said —

"I am better to-day."

"You look more like yourself, what there is of you," he replied, taking the hand she held out to him gently in his own.

Presently Alf returned with Mrs. Elwood and Gertie. Mary told them to sit down, and then began to speak with a flush on her cheek.

Alf saw it, and whispered to her —

"Make it as short as possible; we shall understand."

"I want to tell you why I went away, that you mayn't think it was because I didn't love you. I was sure I had made you all unhappy by my horrid temper, and one day—you remember the thunderstorm—I was sitting in the wood, in 'my arbour,' and two people went by talking about me. One of them said, 'She's a regular Turk. Her family find it hard enough to get on with her.' After that I determined you shouldn't suffer that hardship any longer. I know I was wrong now, and I am very, very sorry that I have been such a trouble to you all."

Mary said her say, with her eyes fixed on the wall, and no sign of agitation beyond the coming and going of her colour. Mrs. Elwood and Gertie were in tears. Tom knit his brows terribly, got up in the middle, and stood in the window with his back to them.

When she had finished speaking, he strode out of the room, with an exclamation which included an ugly word.

Alf motioned to Gertie, and they left Mary alone with her step-mother.

"My poor, dear child, I wish I had known this before. To think of such a thing!" bemoaned Mrs. Elwood. "Surely, my child, you might have known how much we loved and valued you. For though I have sometimes regretted that you could not control your temper better, I didn't overlook your many good qualities."

"I have treated you very badly, mamma."

"We won't think of it any more. I feel I have been to blame for not putting myself more in your place. I have often reproached myself afterwards for things I have said to you when I have been annoyed."

The tears were running down Mrs. Elwood's cheeks.

"Oh, mamma!" and Mary hid her face in the clothes.

"Now I shall have you ill again," said Mrs. Elwood, alarmed. "Give me a kiss, and let us forget all about it, and I will send Alf up; he is the best nurse."

Mary twined her arms round Mrs. Elwood's neck, and felt that she could never again harbour a bitter thought against her.

Instead of Alf, Tom was the first to appear. He hurried in, looking very much flustered.

"I say, Polly, I am off to Brentham. The train won't wait while I make a speech. But I'll cut my own tongue out, and somebody else's, too, if it will do you any good, and be glad of the job."

"Put your old head down here."

"Will you punch it?" begged Tom, so pathetically that Mary broke into a feeble laugh.

"Don't, I say, Polly. There, what is it?"

"Look here," she whispered, burying her

fingers in his curls, "you know who it was. I couldn't help that. But don't put it down in your memory against him, there's a good boy. Promise, or else I shan't let you go, and you'll miss the train."

"All right. I can't afford to do that. Good-bye, old girl;" and, shaking his locks into their place, Tom hurried away, giving her a farewell nod as he reached the door.

It was not long before Alf came up. He looked anxiously at his sister, but the quiet, restful expression of her face satisfied him.

"How good everybody is! I feel like a little fish swimming about in a sea of love," said Mary, smiling at the oddness of her simile. "How could I have been so foolish? I saw it all that day on the rocks, Alf. It was dreadful! To have been thinking that I was hardly treated by God and man, and suddenly to see that it was all the other way. Worst of all, Alf—" and Mary paused and looked straight before her, with sorrowful eyes and

firmly closed lips. But it was only for a few moments, and she looked up again with her brightest smile. "You have all been kind and good, Alf; but *He* has been the kindest of all."

"Oh, Mary!" Alf's voice told of a world of thankful happiness, and his "transparent" face, as Mary called it, looked radiant. But he was afraid of exciting her, and went on quietly, "When did you find that out?"

"Something Gertie said showed it me."

Alf did not speak again, and Mary, after a few minutes, closed her eyes and was soon asleep.

From that day forward she made steady progress, and, after a few weeks, was considered strong enough to bear the journey to Brentham.

Not even after the longest term at school had there been such a happy home-coming.

"There's no place like home, after all," was her greeting to Tom, as she got out of

the train, and looked round to see if she recognised other friendly faces.

"I can tell you I have found it a confoundedly dull place."

"Yes, poor boy! I forgot that you had been all by yourself. We'll keep you alive now."

Tom made no reply then, but, as he drove Mary home, he said—

"I shall be away on Saturday and Sunday. I shall leave here on Friday evening."

"What a shame! Why? Where are you going?"

"I have a little business in the West," answered Tom, carelessly.

"Oh, you silly moth!" exclaimed Mary, mentally.

"I suppose you will arrange to come back with Effie on Monday, then?" she said.

"Possibly," replied Tom.

"It is a shame to run away when we are

such a small party. We can't spare you any longer."

Alf was away reading for orders, and Effie had been spending the last three weeks in the Lake District with Mrs. Barritt, and had begged for a few days' further leave, that she might join a party in making the ascent of Helvellyn.

On Sunday Mary went to church, for the first time, to a short afternoon service. As she entered, the sun was shining through the side lights, glorifying the labour of patient hands in past ages, and, as it fell upon the stained glass of the north transept, changing the white into radiant silver, and blotting out the colours. Could it be the same building in which she had spent so many weary hours? Yes; there, in the window facing the pew, were the same impracticable diamonds out of which she had so often tried to make symmetrical figures; there were the sculptured forms where the dust played tricks with the

laws of chiaroscuro; and those—yes, surely, those were the same words that she had heard so frequently, but now they breathed, now they burned.

She was walking home quietly with Gertie after the service, when they saw a tall figure stride over a stile some distance ahead, and walk along in front of them at a rapid pace.

"Why, there's Tom!" exclaimed Mary.

"So it is. I thought he would have come back with Effie," said Gertie.

When they reached the house, Tom was not to be seen downstairs. Mary took off her things and went into the library to find a book. She opened the door and then stopped, for Tom was standing against the mantel-piece, leaning his head on his hands and looking utterly crushed.

She hesitated whether to go in or draw back. But, having got so far, she could not bear to leave him in trouble, so she went up and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Tom did not move, but after a few moments he passed his hand through his hair, then clasped both hands behind his head.

"I'm blest, Polly," he began, "if I can tell how many shirts I ought to take away with me for two or three months. Here, if you want to help a fellow, just make me out a list of what I shall want."

"What *do* you mean, Tom?"

"I have a notion in my head of seeing something of the world. I have arranged with old Forrest, and I think of leaving my card on Brother Jonathan."

"Oh, Tom, I'm sorry," said Mary.

"Of course you twig; but you needn't tell tales. I am a confounded ass, that's the long and short of it, and nothing but the sea breezes will do for me."

"When do you go?"

"I go up to Liverpool on Tuesday."

"So soon! What will mamma say?"

"Plague it! she'll say far too much. I'll

write from Liverpool. She needn't know I am going any further until I am out of the way. I don't want a fuss."

"She won't like that," remonstrated Mary. "You had better let me tell her."

"No, I won't. So there's an end of it."

It was an end of it so far as Tom was concerned, for he went off, leaving all but Mary under the impression that he was going to Liverpool on business. But when his letter came, every one found it advisable to give Mrs. Elwood a wide berth for some little time. She was—and naturally so—very much hurt, and thought Tom's behaviour a poor return for the kindness and affection she had always bestowed upon him. Gertie was sure that he would be drowned, and only Effie, who had just come home, heaved a sigh of relief when she heard that for two or three months at any rate he would be out of the way.

CHAPTER IX.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

"SEVEN o'clock, Miss Mary."

"Wait a minute, Sarah, I am not awake yet," replied a sleepy voice.

Sarah manifested no surprise at the information. She went to the window and said, as she looked out —

"It's going to be a beautiful day, miss."

"That's right. Now I think I can tumble out; thank you, Sarah."

Mary got up, made her toilet, somewhat leisurely, and knelt down to pray.

She rose from her knees with a light heart, and went to the window. The silver half-moon was high in the heavens, paling now, for the sun already tipped the bare trees with gold, and set the windows of the scattered cottages on the hill-side ablaze. She threw up the sash and put out her head to catch a glimpse of the rising sun round the corner of the house. The air was balmy ; everything recalled the spring. Rooks were flying overhead, a missel-thrush had taken sole possession of the haw-thorn tree, and a pair of blackbirds were helping themselves to the remaining fruit on the Siberian crab. Mary leant out of the window and let the soft breeze play on her forehead and blow her hair about. As she watched, the rosy tints faded away, and a golden light began to glorify field and wood on the hills. She looked up through the " sun-fringed " clouds with an expression such as Raphael has given to the cherubs in his peerless picture, and a smile parted her lips as

if a spirit-message had reached her from the invisible world of which the scene before her was but a shadow. Then she drew in her head, and sat down with her Bible for a quiet quarter of an hour's reading, turning her back upon the attractions of the outer world. She paused for a few moments after she had closed her book, then popped her head out of the window for another breath of the sweet morning air, tidied her room, and danced along the passage until she met Gertie.

"Good-morning, old child," she said, kissing her; and, seizing Gertie round the waist, she made her run downstairs at a much quicker pace than the plump little body was accustomed to.

"Oh, Gertie, I feel so frisky. I must do something. Do come and have a run in the garden with me. You don't want a hat; it is just like summer. Come along."

"We must put something on our feet," premised prudent Gertie.

Shod in goloshes, they went out. Mary skipped about like a kitten, here, there, and everywhere, peeping through the trees, looking to see if Jack Frost had spared a spray of mignonette, and rejoiced to find a pansy.

"I wish you weren't quite so frisky," remonstrated Gertie. "I want to talk to you about something very particular."

"At your service, madam," replied Mary, sobering down at once, and putting her arm round Gertie's neck. "What is it?"

"It is about Effie. You know how queer she is. I can't make it out at all. She snaps at me right and left in the bedroom."

"Poor little thing!" said Mary, stroking Gertie's cheek. "I'm sorry."

"That isn't why I told you, though. I think something must be wrong with her."

"Perhaps she is ill, and doesn't like to speak about it. Poor Effie!—and I have felt so angry with her sometimes, as if I *must* say something sharp," said Mary, regretfully.

"I don't know what it is, but I wish you would just notice."

"I will," promised Mary; and the bell summoned them indoors.

After breakfast came Gertie's French reading—a pleasure to both teacher and pupil. That over, Mary collected her painting materials and prepared to go out.

"Oh, by the bye, I mustn't leave mamma to do the Clothing Club accounts all alone. I know she spoke of making them up this morning."

"I'll attend to that."

"No, I know you hate accounts even more than I do. Go out with Effie."

"She's gone. I heard the garden door shut while we were reading. Don't let us quarrel about it. You ought to know by this time that if you want to make me happy, you have only to find something I can do for you."

So Mary went out alone.

It was a glorious day. Everything was "apparelled in celestial light," from the larches, gleaming white against the blue sky to the moss on the low wall below the hedge. Soft cirri, like cherubs' wings, floated overhead. All nature smiled upon her; the soft breeze fanned her cheek caressingly, and Mary's "heart leapt up," and she felt it a joy merely to exist.

On the outskirts of the town rose the dreary walls of the workhouse. Below an irregular line of small windows looking down upon the road were the square openings of a row of wooden ventilators. In each sat a sparrow, prim and cosy, believing, no doubt, that they were there solely for his pleasure, and therein showing a spirit worthy of a larger biped.

Mary did not moralize, however, as she greeted them with, "You little darlings," and passed on into the town.

It was market day, and Brentham was very busy. A crowd had gathered outside the

Register Office, waiting for the tardy re-appearance of a couple; and a group of children, prepared to shout, "Shabby wedding," according to a courteous northern custom, were tuning up for the occasion by screaming "Rags and Bones!" after a miserable-looking specimen of humanity. Whether the appellation was meant to apply to his person or to his occupation did not appear. As Mary passed the next turning, she happened to glance up the street, and recognized a familiar figure. It was Effie, and Mary's first impulse was to join her. But second thoughts led her to pass on.

Effie had just left the post-office, and came out with a letter in her hand, which she thrust into her pocket, after glancing at the post-mark. This suggested an explanation of several things which puzzled Mary—Effie's restlessness and the unsociable way in which she had often dodged her sisters and contrived to go out alone. Mary walked on,

pondering over this strange conduct, and wondering whether she ought to tell Effie what she had seen, and get her to explain.

It was a troublesome point to decide, and before she had come to any conclusion her attention was arrested by a voice behind her, and, looking round, she saw Sir Humphrey Stephens.

He held out his hand, his whole face expressive of pleasure.

"The temptation to stop you was too great to be resisted," he said, as he walked on beside her. "I am so glad to see you out again. Are you quite strong now?"

"Yes, thank you. I feel perfectly well," replied Mary, with her frank smile.

"You look better than I expected to see you. I heard of your illness when I was abroad, and I have been so anxious to know that you had fairly recovered."

"You are very kind," said Mary, gratefully. "Everybody is. I am sure those beautiful

flowers that Lady Stephens sent did me ever so much good."

Mary spoke in the simplest manner, with her bright eyes raised to his.

Sir Humphrey looked half amused, half nonplussed.

"You know you are the heroine of the neighbourhood."

"I am sure I don't know why, then," said Mary. "If you mean because I could not watch my sister drown before my eyes without doing anything to save her, I think there was more selfishness in that than anything else, for I am sure the other would have been the hardest to bear."

"To you, no doubt, it would," replied Sir Humphrey. "Do you notice any changes in Brentham?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Not many. It is"—she was going to say "a very conservative place," but checked

herself, and substituted "not given to change."

"It was some time since you had seen it?"

"I was here at Christmas."

"Do you know that a certain step of yours was not strictly in accordance with Conservative principles?"

Mary coloured and laughed.

"It wasn't," she said; "but it is very unkind to bring that up against me."

"Your going away?"

"No; I don't mean that." Her face sobered.

"What then?"

"My talking politics at a ball. I think it might be forgotten by this time."

"Why should it? I was very much interested," he returned, greatly amused.

"You are pleased to be satirical. It is very unkind," protested Mary, laughingly, for she did not mind in the least now.

"I am not satirical. I have often thought of what you said. But about your going away? I am going to ask a very rude question—why did you do it?"

"Because I was very silly."

"I think you deserve a scolding. But you won't do it again?"

"Oh, no," said Mary, smiling at the very idea.

Sir Humphrey received no more definite answer to his question, but he had satisfied himself that her sudden freak had nothing to do with his attentions; indeed, he very much doubted whether she was at all aware that he meant to pay her any.

"You are going to sketch, I see," he said, looking at the painting materials that he was carrying. "Isn't that dangerous work at this time of year?"

"I think not, with such a wrap as that; and it is a south wind."

"I advise you to make a bold, dashing

sketch, and finish it in the house. You must not catch cold."

By this time they had reached the entrance to the Court-house.

"I must stop here, or I should have asked leave to carry these things to your destination," said Sir Humphrey, handing her the shawl and painting-case.

"Thank you," replied Mary; and, attracted by a pair of eyes fixed upon her with evident interest, she looked up and saw Mr. Burns standing on the steps.

Mary nodded kindly to him.

"Oh, dear," she thought. "I hope he isn't going to pay us another visit, and bring us some more tittle-tattle."

"Who is that man?" asked Sir Humphrey. "I used to see him about a good deal at one time."

"He was a clerk in the bank a good many years ago."

"I remember now. But I must not keep

you, and I am due inside. I hope to call at the Grange this morning. Shall I find Mrs. Elwood at liberty ?"

"Yes, I know she will be at home."

"Good-bye, then, and don't sketch too long."

Mary returned one of her bright smiles in answer, and saying, "I will try to remember," set off in the direction of the water-mill, while Sir Humphrey, finding someone else to speak to, stood and watched her out of sight, and Mr. Burns stood and watched Sir Humphrey with the waggish expression that his face could sometimes assume.

Mary tripped through the fields, singing to herself as she went. Hips and haws had taken the place of the autumn-tinted leaves, save where a few yellow rose leaves still clung to the forlorn stems. Each berry twinkled at her as she passed; and sparrows and chaffinches chirped their satisfaction as they con-

templated the winter store. At the spot she had fixed upon for her sketch an old bridge spanned the stream. The side facing her was in shadow, and the light reflected from the sunlit water played on the under surface of the arch. Mary scrambled down to the rocky bed of the river, and took up her position upon a large stone. She had thrown her shawl down beside her and begun to outline, when she remembered Sir Humphrey's warning, and picked it up and drew it round her shoulders.

"How kind Sir Humphrey is," she thought, as she pencilled her careful outline. "I like him so much. I wonder if he knew papa very well? Anyone that knew papa must have loved him. How gentle and good he was. Alf is very like him in many ways." And then her mind travelled from Alf to Alf's friend, who was going out to Africa as a missionary, and she thought what a long way off it was,

and wondered whether Maurice would come over to see them and say good-bye before he went away.

But now the colouring demanded her whole attention. She secured the chiaroscuro, put in her first washes, finishing the centre of her picture only, and then went home.

The brilliancy of the day had departed by the time she reached the house. The garden lay in a quiet shade, and the light looked soberly out of the windows.

Mrs. Elwood was alone in the dining-room when she went in. She greeted Mary with a beaming smile; indeed, she looked as if she could not help beaming to save her life—was "beamish," in short. But she bethought herself of Mary's necessities.

"Aren't you tired, dear? No? Nor cold? You must be hungry, at any rate. Have something to eat."

Mary took a glass of water and a biscuit, and sat down on the arm of her step-mother's

chair. Mrs. Elwood looked at her with an enquiring expression, and when she had finished her refreshment, said —

"Mary, dear, Sir Humphrey has been here."

"Yes, mamma, I know. I met him."

"He was rather anxious about your sitting out at this time of year."

"He thinks I am an invalid still. But that is quite a mistake, isn't it? Don't I look well, mamma?" said Mary, bending over her.

"Yes, you do; and bonny, my child," replied Mrs. Elwood, patting her cheek. "I don't wonder at Sir Humphrey."

"What do you mean, mamma?" asked Mary, not seeing the connection.

"At his taking a fancy to you, dear," said Mrs. Elwood, taking both her hands, and looking her straight in the face.

Mary returned the look with an unconscious smile and a kiss.

"Oh, does he like me? I am glad, because I think him a very nice, kind man. Now, mamma, I have an important question upon which I want to consult you before you go away."

"Yes, dear, what is it?" replied Mrs. Elwood, in an encouraging and sympathetic tone.

"What do you think Alf would like for a Christmas present?"

"I really can't tell you. We will talk about that another time. I want to speak about something else just now. Mary dear, Sir Humphrey came to tell me he wished to pay his addresses to you."

Mary's eyes opened their very widest.

"Mamma!" she exclaimed in extreme astonishment, "what *do* you mean?"

"Sir Humphrey wants to marry you, dear. I don't see anything so surprising in it. Such things do occur not infrequently."

"But I thought that was his wife with him

at the election? I have often heard of Lady Stephens."

"My child! You thought he was married! Why, Lady Stephens is his mother. This is very unfortunate. That accounts for your not understanding him. Very unfortunate, indeed," repeated Mrs. Elwood, in perplexity.

Mary's face was a study. Astonishment, distress, confusion, mingled with a sense of the ridiculous. She felt half inclined to laugh and half to cry, but put a strong control upon herself, and did neither.

"What am I to do, mamma?" she said, presently, after gazing steadfastly into the fire without finding any solution of her difficulties.

"Why, my dear, you know best whether you can like him or not. I am sure he would make a very kind husband."

"I can't quite take it in," said Mary, pressing her hand to her forehead.

"Don't be in a hurry to decide. You can

tell Sir Humphrey how matters stand ; he will wait for your answer."

"He must, unless I say no at once."

"Pray don't be in a hurry," urged Mrs. Elwood again. "A good husband is not a thing to be lightly thrown away. You may say no once too often."

"Is he coming here again?"

"Yes, to-morrow morning."

"Oh, dear," sighed Mary. "Will you excuse my running away now, mamma?"

"Certainly, dear."

Mary made her escape, and ran upstairs, She peeped into her sister's room—yes, there was Gertie sitting on her ottoman, mending her gloves. Mary sat down by her, threw her arms round her neck, and burst into a fit of hysterical crying.

"Mary, dear Mary, do stop. What is it?"

But Mary could not stop, until Gertie, alarmed, talked of calling Mrs. Elwood.

"No; I'm all right now. Come to my room to-night, and I'll tell you all about it."

CHAPTER X.

This above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night to day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

"Now, Gertie, what am I to do?" said Mary, when she had told her sister what had happened. "I wish it were true that to-morrow never comes. I never was so taken aback in my life."

"But you do like Sir Humphrey?"

"Yes, I like him," replied Mary, emphasizing the verb.

"Then of course you will marry him. I wonder what Sydney will say to it?"

Sydney Forrest had appeared on the scene again, and his attentions had been so assiduous as to arouse the suspicion that

he had begun to think that he could get on very well with Mary, whether her family could or not.

"I don't think Sydney will trouble me much more. He is certainly rather dense, but I think I have contrived at last to convince him that I should prefer being left alone. But you needn't take for granted that I am going to marry Sir Humphrey."

"It would be very grand," said Gertie, meditatively.

"That is not an inducement," returned Mary, decidedly. "We go into society for change and amusement, and enjoy it. But always to have a house full of people to entertain, and those not friends, only acquaintances, I shouldn't feel as if I had a home."

"I don't think you know—" began Gertie, slowly.

"You don't think I know much about it. Perhaps you are right. But I have a vision of being lifted off my feet and dangling in the

air, and not knowing what is to happen next. And I know I should feel so driven. No, Gertie, I won't be grand," said Mary, with a shake of her shoulders. "I can't. There!"

"But Sir Humphrey, Mary. If he really likes you?"

"Ah, that's another matter," replied Mary, gravely. "But I hardly think he can. He has seen so little of me. Though perhaps that is the very reason why such a thing is possible," she added, dryly. "And I know next to nothing of him. He is very pleasant to talk to, and I believe he is a good man, but we might not suit each other in the least."

"I wish I could help you," said Gertie.

"I don't suppose anyone can. We had better go to bed; I shall have to puzzle something out before morning."

Gertie kissed her and got up to go.

"I hope you don't mind my telling you," she stopped to say, with her hand on the

door, "but I always thought it was such a pity that you seemed to take against Maurice. I am sure he liked you."

"Nonsense, child; what an idea!"

If Gertie had thought to throw oil on the troubled waters, she had made a great mistake.

What little peace of mind had remained, left poor Mary now, for Gertie's words, though they led to a discovery which settled one point, opened out many other difficult questions. Her brain whirled, and all at once she felt herself, like "Alice in Wonderland," drawn out like a telescope until her feet touched the further wall, and then contracted as suddenly into the space of half a yard. This was always a sign to her to stop thinking and go to sleep with the utmost possible expedition; but her head ached, and her throat felt strained and sore, and it was not until the gruff bass of the Brahma cock, followed by the squeaking treble of a young cockerel,

had announced the first signs of dawn, that she fell into a troubled sleep.

Morning found still unsolved the troublesome problem—"If someone likes me that I don't like, and I like someone that doesn't like me, what is to be done?"

It suggested another. "Ought I to like someone that doesn't like me? Ah! but supposing he did like me a little bit, until I was too disagreeable to him, isn't that some excuse? But why do I think he did like me a little bit? Why do I think it? Because I do. Then why was I so disagreeable to him?"

The last question took so long to answer, that when, early in the afternoon, Sir Humphrey was announced, little progress had been made towards solving the principal part of the problem—What is to be done in the present emergency?

"Oh, Gertie, I wish you would go in instead of me. I am shaking all over. Oh, dear, I

wish I wasn't such a goose," said poor Mary, when she received the summons to the drawing-room.

"No one would notice. You won't mind so much after the first. Don't be in a hurry to decide," was Gertie's parting counsel.

Sir Humphrey kindly wasted no time in preamble, but told his business at once. He was evidently thoroughly in earnest, but he did not sink the considerate gentleman in the importunate lover. This made Mary's part the more difficult.

She went to the window and stood, half facing him, with her hands on the back of a chair, and her eyes fixed on a flower in the carpet. For some moments she could not control her nervousness, but as soon as she could speak, she began in breathless tones —

"You are, and have been, very, very kind to me, and I *do* like you; but —"

"I see. This is hard upon you. Mrs. Elwood told me of the unfortunate mistake.

I must be patient, and wait for a promise until the liking has had time to grow into love, mustn't I?"

Mary shook her head, then added warmly, lifting her eyes to his for a moment—

"The *friendship* would grow; I am sure of that."

Sir Humphrey looked pleased.

"I have not had a fair chance, have I?"

"No," admitted Mary, still gazing at the flower, and wishing it would suggest any way out of her dilemma.

"You will give me one? You will let me take what opportunities I can of being with you? You won't run away from me?"

"I think it is because you know so little of me that you like me. I am sure you would be disappointed in me. I wish you would take that on trust and not think of me any more," pleaded Mary.

"I can't do that. I have never loved anyone but you, and I shall never care for anyone

else. But I am willing to submit to the test. Let me see as much of you as I can. I shall not trouble you with open attentions. No one need know that anything has passed between us. Let all this be as if it had never been, and let us start fair."

Poor Mary, what could she say? In her heart she said no, no, but she had an unconquerable shrinking from giving pain. The request was modest—to refuse it would be harsh; so she made a last appeal and prepared to yield under protest.

"Won't that make the position harder for us both? I don't think—no, I am sure no good will come of it."

"Do you think me very unreasonable that I can't give up the prize without a fair chance of winning it? Some good will come of it—I shall be satisfied. You won't refuse me this?"

"If that will satisfy you, then let it be as you wish," replied Mary, in a low voice.

"Thank you, that is like yourself," replied Sir Humphrey, in a tone of studied quiet. "Now I will go, for I have tired you too much already. You must take care of yourself for the sake of — of those who love you."

"'Like myself,' that was true enough, weak cowardly creature that I am," thought Mary, when she was left alone. She threw herself down on the sofa, and lay there with her hands under her head, and an expression of utter weariness upon her face, trying to forget everything, but that she was very tired and that rest was sweet; and what had taken place had begun to seem like a troubled dream, when Gertie gently opened the door and peeped in.

Mary held out her arms to her, and Gertie came and sat down on the floor beside her.

"Do have a glass of wine, Mary. You look so ill."

"I am all right. But Gertie, I have been

such an awful coward, and I am more muddled than ever."

"What did you do?"

"I couldn't give a point-blank no. He was as kind and thoughtful as he could be, and I do like him so much, that it made it very hard for me."

"Why should you say no if you like him?"

"I don't like him in that way, and I know I never shall. I knew it then, but I couldn't give a reason."

"Then are you engaged?"

"Engaged? of course not! No, but things are just where they were, and I shall have to meet him constantly and try to break him off liking me as best I may. It will be very miserable. It has been no kindness to him either, but somehow, when he so readily took it for granted that I had not had time to learn to care for him and seemed so hopeful that love might come, I was rather shaken and

dared not trust my own instincts. I lost my head, in fact."

"I am dreadfully sorry. It will be very awkward supposing that you don't learn to like him."

Mary smiled faintly—Gertie could not understand; it was no good discussing the subject with her.

"Will you ask Effie to come here, dear? If I want to win her confidence I must take her into mine."

Gertie went in search of her sister, and soon found Effie, who had been hanging about, all curiosity.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked, in her harsh, sharp way, when she saw Mary on the sofa.

"Tired out, dear, that's all," replied Mary, gently. "Come and sit down, I want to talk to you."

Effie's cheeks flushed. She was not quite sure what was coming, for she had caught

a glimpse of Mary's retreating figure as she left the post-office.

"I thought I would tell you about Sir Humphrey," said Mary, guessing at her thoughts, and wishing to put her at ease at once.

"Oh, did he come to see you? I knew he had been here. Do tell me."

Mary told her what had passed.

"Of course you will marry him," was Effie's comment.

"I shan't marry anyone unless I love him with my whole heart."

"Oh, well—" began Effie, then she fell to playing with the tassel of the cushion, and presently went on—"Then if you did love someone with your whole heart you would think it right to marry him, wouldn't you?"

"That depends. It might be right or it might not. Tell me what you are aiming at, dear. You can trust me."

"Yes. I will tell you, because I can't bear it any longer, and I don't know what to

do," cried Effie, bursting into tears. "I am married."

Mary was too much taken aback to speak.

"There, I knew you would be horrified, and look at me as if I had committed murder!" exclaimed Effie, bitterly.

"No, I don't," said Mary, sitting up and laying her hand on Effie's shoulder. "But no wonder I am surprised. When was it?"

"When I was staying with Mrs. Barritt. It was all Tom's fault. You know he hates Orlando like poison. There was no reason why I shouldn't marry him. Mamma wouldn't have said anything against it, and Alf wouldn't, but you know Tom just leads mamma by the nose, and he always gets his own way. I might have waited if I had known he was going to America. I hope he'll stay there now," said Effie, fiercely. "It has been just miserable."

"Poor child!" said Mary. "I am very sorry. I wish you hadn't done it, you know,

but still I feel that it was very hard for you."

"What must I do? He says he has got the house ready. We are going to live near Appleby."

"You must tell mamma about it."

"No, I can't. I would much rather go off quietly, and let her hear afterwards."

"No, Effie, dear. You know that didn't answer in Tom's case. You might make a breach that would never be healed, and cut yourself quite off from us. You had better tell her at once."

"She'll say a lot of horrid things, and I can't bear it. I've stood quite enough already."

"Would you like me to tell her?" suggested Mary, reluctantly.

Effie jumped at the idea.

"Yes, do. And persuade her to let me go as soon as possible."

"Here she comes," said Mary; and Effie

made her escape by one door as Mrs. Elwood came in at the other.

"Well, my dear child, and has it been such a frightful ordeal?" she asked, smiling.

"Rather trying."

"And what have you to tell me?"

"I couldn't decide anything. He wanted me to wait. But I know that I shall never marry Sir Humphrey."

Mrs. Elwood's face lengthened.

"I made a resolution that I would never try to influence you in these matters," she said, plaintively. "But I thought you were a sensible girl, Mary. Now just let me say, 'Don't be in a hurry to make up your mind.' You are not in love with Sydney Forrest?"

"Certainly not."

"I have no doubt that you have set up some ideal of perfection in your own mind, and think you must say no to everyone that doesn't come up to it."

"No, a piece of perfection wouldn't suit me, or rather *vice-versâ*."

"Well, I'll say no more. But I know what your father would have thought about it, and I wish any of you girls may get as good a husband. Of course, your father was one in a thousand. If you wait for someone to equal him, you may wait a long while. But I will say that I think Sir Humphrey has behaved like a true gentleman."

"Like himself, then," said Mary.

"Just so. And therefore he is the very man for you. You know I have always thought you rather hard to please in that particular, what with your Spencer and your Tennyson."

"Am I?" said Mary. "Then," she added after a pause, "if a man is respectable and steady, you would not mind his not being quite up to the mark?"

"Of course I should mind, if you mean as a husband for any of you girls. I know my duty to your father better than that. What

are you driving at? Have you fallen in love with someone?"

"I was not thinking of myself. But suppose such a person as Mr. Sims or Sydney Forrest?"

"Well, Sydney Forrest is a gentleman, I suppose. He ought to be—the son of your father's partner," returned Mrs. Elwood, rather sharply.

"Mr. Sims is quite as gentlemanly," urged Mary.

"I say nothing against him. Do you want to marry him that you are so anxious for my opinion?" asked Mrs. Elwood.

This was unpleasant. In former days Mary would have considered such a question an insult, and walked straight out of the room. But, though her colour rose and her eyes flashed, her temper was now under better control, so she made no reply, but cast about in her mind for the best way of breaking her disagreeable news to Mrs. Elwood.

"Did you not know that he liked Effie, mamma?"

"There was a little foolish flirtation, I believe. Do say straight out what you have to say."

"I am afraid it will be a—you won't like to hear it."

"What! is she engaged? Nonsense!"

"She has been engaged for some time, and she was married while she was away."

"Effie married! to Mr. Sims! I cannot believe it possible. How long have you known this?" asked Mrs. Elwood, turning sharply upon Mary.

Mary's colour rose again at the implied suspicion.

"I heard it to-day. Effie told me herself. She is very unhappy about it."

"And you take her part, I see that. Some of you must have known that he was making love to her. I feel very much hurt that I should have been treated as if I were nobody,

and kept in the dark in this way. Oh dear, oh dear! Why did nobody tell me?"

"Because nobody knew, mamma. We all noticed that he was attentive to her; you must have seen that. But Tom thought he had put a stop to it. It was just that that brought it all on. He spoke so strongly that they thought their only chance of getting married was to do it secretly. It was a pity Tom interfered."

"So all the blame is to be laid upon Tom, because he is absent. Yes, I know you are quite ready to take Effie's part, but there is not the least excuse for her."

"You are very unjust to me, mamma," replied Mary, warmly. "I am only telling you facts."

Mrs. Elwood paid no attention, and went on —

"Such a self-willed set I never knew. I am sure I have done my best for you all, but I little thought what I should have to go

through. First, you must go off and make people think that you are badly treated at home. Then Tom goes away, without so much as saying good-bye; and now Effie crowns all with this disgraceful business. Perhaps you have something more to tell me?"

"I have nothing more to say," replied Mary, coldly, moving towards the door.

But on the way her conscience smote her, and, putting herself for a moment in Mrs. Elwood's place, she reproached herself for her want of forbearance.

Going back to her step-mother, she put her arm round her, and said —

"Mamma, dear, I am as sorry as anybody can possibly be about this. I don't want to excuse Effie at all. She knows what I think about it. But she is very unhappy, and dreadfully afraid of what you will say."

"She may well be. But what is to be done? What am I to do?" said poor Mrs. Elwood,

sitting down helplessly, and looking almost ready to cry. "Such a disgraceful thing, and I am sure I couldn't help it!"

"Certainly you couldn't, dear mamma," said Mary, soothingly. "We can only make the best of it. It should be made public at once, I think, and she should go to him."

"Has he enough to keep her? Oh, dear, what will be thought?"

"Only that Effie was a silly girl. No one can blame you. It might have been worse. I believe he is rather well off; and Effie says he has got the house ready."

"It is more than she deserves," snapped Mrs. Elwood. "Well, then, the sooner she goes the better."

"Shall I tell her to write and arrange about it with Mr. Sims?"

"Tell her she can go when she likes. I shan't feel called upon to make any fuss about her. I must attend to other matters when Alf comes."

In two or three days Effie was ready to go. Until the morning of her departure, Mrs. Elwood had treated her with silent displeasure, but before she left had sufficiently recovered her equanimity to deliver a sound homily; and Effie, who was feeling very miserable, received it with becoming tearfulness, whereupon Mrs. Elwood so far relented as to express the hope that things might turn out better than she expected, and condescended to kiss Effie and say good-bye.

CHAPTER XI.

My heart is sair. I dare na tell
My heart is sair for somebody.

TWO urgent letters brought Alf home a few days after Effie had gone to her husband—one from Mrs. Elwood, lamenting Tom's absence, and asking Alf to supply his place as the business man of the family; another from Mary, saying, "I do want you so badly."

"Ah, Alf, you should have come yesterday," she said, as she walked from the station with him. "You could have gone to Aston with us."

"Poor child! How did you get on?"

"I felt horribly shy, of course, and frightened out of my wits by Lady Stephens. She is very kind and gracious, but I could quite imagine being extinguished by a look if one were to offend her. She made me sit by her, and talked to me, and seemed to take it for granted that she was making the acquaintance of her future daughter-in-law. I can't go there again, Alf. It puts me in a false position."

"You have quite made up your mind?"

"Quite. I think I must write to Sir Humphrey, and tell him so."

"It will be your best plan," assented Alf.

"It is strange that all these things should come together. This bother about Effie and Tom's going away. I wonder why he doesn't write. Have you heard?"

"Not for some weeks. The last letter was from New York."

"It will soon be two months since he left.

He may be thinking of coming back. I wish he were at home. I don't like having one's friends such a long way off," she added.

Ah, Mary, well may the colour rise in your cheeks at being betrayed into such—let me say unpremeditated—wiles.

Guileless Alf took the bait at once, and replied —

"I told you about Maurice, didn't I? He goes away in the spring."

"I didn't know when he was to leave. Shall you go there before he sails?"

"I shall either go there or ask him here," replied Alf.

Little did Alf think how much lay in that "or" to his companion.

"I must see him again! I must see him again!" was the passionate cry of her heart, though what was to be gained by seeing him she did not know.

When they reached the house Mary went up to her room, and paced up and down,

whispering wildly, "Do let him come! Do let him come!" It was hardly as a prayer, but rather as a relief to her overwrought feelings, that she uttered her longing. It seemed to help her, for after a few minutes she became quieter.

Then she found her writing materials, and, pressing her hand to her forehead, began to think what she should write to Sir Humphrey. How should she word what she wanted to say in such a way as to cause him the least possible pain? As she thought of her evening at Aston Hall she remembered the many little things in which she had recognised his thoughtful care to put her at her ease and give her pleasure. He had treated her so generously throughout. What reason could be given that could soften her rejection of him? That she had been wise enough to fall in love with someone who cared nothing for her! A pretty reason, truly, and one that should not stand long in

the way. Pride came to the rescue. She would be strong; she would overcome.

But with her resolution mingled many sinkings of heart. She must be patient with herself, and Sir Humphrey must be patient with her. When Maurice was gone, and the sea rolled between them, then she might forget him, and, in time, it was possible that she might make some return to Sir Humphrey.

So she gave up the idea of writing, and went downstairs where she tried hard to be herself, for she was determined that her troubles should not weigh upon the others, especially now that both Effie and Tom were causes of anxiety. In a measure she succeeded, and it was the most cheerful evening that had been spent since Effie left. As it wore on Mary bethought her of the Kreutzer Sonata. She had ordered it when Maurice was with them, and worked hard at it before she left home. Alf was delighted

to take his part. Mary threw her whole soul into it, and played it better than she had ever done before. But the music of the violin seemed to draw out her heart with its yearning tones. She felt as if she could not bear it, and at the end of the Andante stopped, and, looking up at her brother, said, apologetically —

"Alf, shall you mind very much if we don't finish it?"

"Just as you like, dear. But we were getting on splendidly—at least, you were."

"Let us go on, then," said Mary; but Alf caught a ring of resignation in her voice, and said —

"We will play the rest another day. You don't feel up to it."

"I'm stupid, that's all. Let me go to bed, and you say good-night for me, there's a dear boy."

Mary made her escape, and threw herself down on her bed.

"Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do? However shall I get over it, if I break down like this? When will the time go by?"

The next day was Sunday.

"Now I shall be obliged to think of other things," she told herself. But, obliged or not, the thought of Maurice came gliding in through the prayers, through the sermon, even through the Holy Communion, to which Mary was allowed to go as one desirous of being confirmed.

Gertie did not stay to the Sacrament, and she was walking about in the garden when the others reached the house.

"Mary, did you see a tall, dark man that stared at you all church-time?" she asked, eagerly.

"No, I didn't," said Mary, who was pretty well accustomed to being stared at, and had had no thoughts to waste upon her fellow-worshippers.

"He went away in the Aston carriage; but it wasn't Sir Humphrey."

"Sir Humphrey wouldn't have done such a thing. If this man really was looking at me, he is probably one of the numerous cousins, who are anxious to know what sort of a creature their relative has been doing the polite to."

"He certainly was looking at you—staring," persisted Gertie, not satisfied with this explanation. "I am sure he knew you."

"Nonsense, child. Unless it was someone that I met the other night."

"Ah, I suppose it would be," said Gertie.

CHAPTER XII.

When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions.

WHEN would Alf write to Maurice? Here was Monday, and nothing more had been said about it. And yet Maurice might be on the point of making some other engagement; or—oh! how many things might come in the way of his visit.

If it had been a question of less moment to her, Mary would have asked him at once when he meant to write, but dissimulation was unnatural to her; and as she could not trust herself to assume indifference without

a tell-tale blush, there was nothing left but to wait.

The first post went by, for where anxious love would fly, friendship ambles tranquilly, and Alf was quite unconscious of the fever of impatience that his procrastination was causing.—Surely the brain-wave obeys an erratic moon.

After wandering about with small result for the greater part of the morning, humming incessantly, Mary sat down and accompanied her tune vigorously, though noiselessly, with hands and feet.

"Do stop," begged Gertie at last. "It is as bad as a barrel-organ."

"I wish I could," sighed Mary. "I have been grinding away as if my life depended upon it. There I am again," she exclaimed, after a few moments' silence. "I must get something to do. I'll see what Alf is about. Do you want me?" she asked, when she had found her brother. "If not, I might call

to inquire after Mrs. Spencer, and pay my respects to the baby."

"Oh, no; I shall be very glad to get rid of you," said Alf playfully, glancing at her and thinking that a walk would do her good.

"Don't," said Mary, with a deprecating look, which brought him to her side at once, asking —

"Don't what, dear?"

"I know I am a goose, but I can't stand that sort of chaff from you."

"You shall never have anything from me that you don't like, my darling. But you know it is all nonsense?"

"Of course I do. But if you pretend you don't care for me, I have to imagine it true for a moment in order to laugh at it."

"Your imagination is more powerful than mine. I couldn't imagine that true for the ninety-ninth part of a second if I tried ever so hard."

"You dear old boy, I know it. I wish I had not said anything; you will think me such an idiot. But the fact is, I am stupid just now, and I have bad nights. Then the horrid feelings that I used to have come back to me, and I want to be petted and made much of, and not teased by hateful, unkind boys."

Alf smiled, and kissed her.

"She's as great a cosset as ever," he said, stroking her cheek. "But I must have these bad nights attended to. Have you this letter to Sir Humphrey on your mind still?"

"No, I thought I wouldn't write afterwards. Because, perhaps, in time I might—you know, Alf—" Mary ended with a deep-drawn sigh.

Alf thought it didn't sound promising.

"It is very trying for you, dear. I wish he had waited until you were a little stronger. You must get out a good deal, and try to think about it as little as possible."

"I'll go out now."

"Then I will polish off some of my letters, and when you come back I can do anything you like."

"Are you writing to anyone I know?" asked Mary, with her hand on the door-handle and her back to Alf.

"Yes, dear, to Effie."

"Give my love, please;" and she went to get ready with a downcast face.

The nearest way to the Spencers lay through the fields on this side of Brentham. But it had been a wet night, and Mary stood on the top step of the stile for a moment before she made up her mind to take the shorter and muddier way.

The only person in sight was a farmer's wife, clad in a gray plaid shawl, with a blue check handkerchief tied over the back of her bonnet and knotted under her chin, and her skirts gathered well up over her quilted petticoat.

"Vahy clarty," she remarked, as Mary came within hearing.

"Very," replied Mary, looking up with a pleasant smile. "Has there been much rain on the hills?"

"Ay, a canny soop the night."

"It is better than snow, though."

"Ay, it's not such a bad back-end. Last winter was soomthink arful. There's many a man 'ull never farm mair, beggared wi' deed sheep. And when the snow got away, the roads was that slippy and slidy, I can tell you I had a sore set to get doon. That's wor place," said the woman, indicating a farm-house on the top of the hill.

"What a long way!" exclaimed Mary. "Are you going to walk back?"

"To be sure I is; but I's gan in here to see a friend," said the woman, stopping at a gate, "so I'll bid ye good-morning."

Mary pursued her course alone, wondering what sort of a life they led in those scattered

farm-houses. Her sympathies embraced all human-kind. She felt a keen interest in many people with whom she had never exchanged a word, and often a little Brentham child would look up with a smile to catch her eye as she walked slowly past, watching their play in the streets.

Anything which quickened her interest in the outer world was a help to her just now, and she felt already brighter for being taken out of herself for a little while. But it was only for a few moments that her wayfaring friend engaged her mind, and her thoughts quickly reverted to the old channel. In the second field the path was cleaner, and ran close to the hedge. There was little to see, but, from force of habit, Mary kept an eye on the hedgerow as she walked along. The long grass, matted and withered, clung round the hawthorn stems, holding the dead leaves prisoner, and here the bed-straw, and there the wild ivy, tried to make the hedges

still green. Mary saw it all, yet did not see it; her mind was fully occupied, so much occupied that she did not hear footsteps gaining quickly upon her, and was considerably startled when a voice from behind said —

"Miss Elwood."

She turned round at once, changing colour when she saw Major Orres. She looked at him doubtfully and questioningly, but there was no time for consideration, and she was always afraid of judging hardly; so, thinking that he might have come to express sorrow for what had happened when they last met, she held out her hand to him gravely.

"You are still angry with me," he said, as he took it; "but, believe me, I would give everything I possess to undo the past. It was simple madness that made me speak to you then and there."

"It caused me great pain at the time; but that is past now, so it had better be forgotten."

"I am very sorry to have pained you. I was horribly foolish. But now do hear me for one moment, while I say that you think far too seriously of breaking off an engagement. If it were a question of breaking Maude's heart," he went on, with a contemptuous emphasis on the last word, "that would be another matter; but you know that she cares as little for me as I do for her, and, I assure you, she feels it quite a stain on her laurels that she has only been engaged twice before."

"I can't hear Maude spoken of in this way, and I don't see that anything is to be gained by talking over what had better be forgotten."

"I *can't* forget you," broke out Major Orres, almost fiercely. "Do you suppose that if I cared for you in the cold-blooded, limited way that Stephens does I should be here now? Do you know that since I saw you last I have never closed my eyes but

your image has haunted me, and that there is nothing in this world that I would not sacrifice for the sake of winning you?"

"It can never be," replied Mary. "If you were free, I could not be your wife."

They had just reached a corner, and Waif, who, forbidden to growl at Major Orres, had gone on ahead, reappeared round it, closely followed by his old tormentor, now his firm friend, Mat Dodd.

"Wait a moment, Mat," she said, laying a detaining hand on the lad's shoulder, "I should like to walk back through the fields with you. I am going home now," she added, turning to Major Orres.

The rejected man turned white with rage, and, muttering through his teeth, "You will rue this," he lifted his hat and passed on.

Mary walked home as quickly as her trembling limbs could carry her, with Mat at her side, as proud as a peacock with two tails. She smiled and nodded at him as he

talked to her, but hardly knew what he was saying, and even the information that "wor-r-Adam had lamed hisself," and that his mother "had getten a wee baba" was lost upon her.

When she reached the house she had to steady herself against the wall while she rang the bell.

"You don't look altogether clever yet, Miss Mary," remarked the servant, as she let her in.

Mary smiled faintly, and opened the first door that she came to. It was the library, and Alf was still there. He spoke to her as she entered, and by way of answer she tumbled into the nearest chair and fainted away.

She came round, to find herself on the sofa, with Mrs. Elwood and Alf anxiously watching her.

"I never did such a thing before," she said. "I am sorry I frightened you."

"What brought it on, dear?"

"I know what it was. I shall be all right now," replied Mary, evading the question.

Before Mrs. Elwood had had time to inquire further, Gertie came in.

"Why, Mary, what's the matter? I thought you were at the Spencer's. Have you been ill?"

"Only fainted."

"I am very sorry. So you didn't go out at all?"

"Yes, I went part of the way."

"Then I wonder if you saw that gentleman that was in church? I thought I should meet you, so I came back by the fields, and he was just crossing the stile as I got there. You must have passed him."

Mary's cheeks burned, and she looked very uncomfortable.

"Were you so very much struck with this man?"

"Yes, I was. I want to know who it was. Did you meet him? I believe you did."

"I don't see why I should gratify your curiosity. Oh, don't bother, Gertie."

"Am I making your headache?" said Gertie, penitently, while the other two exchanged glances.

"We will leave her alone to be quiet," said Mrs. Elwood; and she took Gertie away while Alf stayed at Mary's request.

"Lie down again, and I'll read to you. I know what you like."

Alf brought a copy of "Hiawatha" and began to read.

"That's right," said Mary smiling, as she recognized the opening lines.

She lay very still, with her hand over her eyes, and, after reading for some time, Alf gradually lowered his voice, and then stopped, thinking she was asleep.

"Thank you, dear Alf," she said, gently.

"I thought you had napped off," replied Alf, disappointed.

"I never sleep in the day-time. Now go on

with anything else you want to do, and I will lie still."

"I think I will write to Maurice," said Alf, deliberating, "or should I wait a little longer?"

"He might make some engagement and not be able to come if you put off asking him, that is the only thing," replied Mary.

"Oh, you are thinking of his coming here! Then I must consult the lady of the house. I rather thought of running over to stay with him for a week or so," said Alf, still hesitating.

Mary almost held her breath as his decision trembled in the balance.

"Would you like him to bring his sister?"

"Very much indeed," replied Mary, promptly.

"Then I will see if we can arrange it so."

Mrs. Elwood was quite agreeable. Alf wrote to his friend, and Mary added an invitation to Nelly, with, however, small expectation that she would accept it.

"Well, dear, how do you feel now?" said Mrs. Elwood, coming in as Mary finished her note.

"Oh, I am better," she replied, quite brightly. Such is the power of a vague hope.

But hope was not certainty, and Mary looked daily with eager eyes for a reply from Trimblemere. When the return post came without it she wondered why they didn't write; the next day she felt sure that Alf's letter had missed fire.

Alf, rightly concluding that his friend was from home, exhibited no impatience, though it was some days before he received a letter in the well-known hand.

It bore the Appleby postmark.

"That must be from Mr. Sims," said Gertie. "Orlando, I mean."

"No, it is Maurice's writing. Ah, he can't come. He wants me to go there after Christmas. That will suit me very well," said Alf,

cheerfully, little knowing what a blow his news was to one attentive listener. "Your note has been sent to Trimblemere, Mary, so you will hear soon. He has been to call on Effie."

The last item of news, though not unimportant, was lost upon Mary. She had disappeared, and was not seen again until she came down to lunch, looking pale and dispirited.

"I think we ought to ask Sir Humphrey in next week, Mary, dear," said Mrs. Elwood.

"Ought we, mamma? Very well," replied Mary, wearily.

"My dear child, one would think it was some penance I was imposing upon you," remonstrated Mrs. Elwood.

Mary could not deny that she did look upon it in such a light, so said nothing.

"Will you take a turn with me in the garden?" asked Alf, after lunch.

Mary was nothing loth. A nervous dread

of meeting Major Orres again had kept her indoors for the last few days, and she pined for fresh air. Besides, a stroll with Alf would help to pass the afternoon.

"Dear Mary, you must not let this state of things go on," began Alf, after they had walked for some moments in silence. "It is wearing you out."

Mary turned away her head; but the tears began to run down her cheek, and she could not hide them.

"This is your fault, Alf," she said, dashing them away. "I did not mean to be so silly. But I am bothered all round, and I don't know what to do."

"Poor child. Yes, there has been this trouble about Effie."

"And Tom, too."

"Yes, indeed. It is very strange that we don't hear. But I know it is this business about Sir Humphrey that is worrying you most, isn't it?"

"It is an anxiety," replied Mary, after a moment's pause.

"May I ask one thing? Is there anyone you like better?"

"Alf!" remonstrated Mary, reproachfully, while the colour mounted to her cheeks.

"Because it would be better to let Sir Humphrey know at once if there is no chance for him."

"Yes, I love you better," she said, recovering herself, "and I think it very likely that you may have a maiden sister to plague you until the end of the chapter; unless you find someone else and don't want her. In that case I might possibly feel, in time, that if I could make Sir Humphrey happy, it would make me happier to do it. But would he care to wait? It is hard upon him. What must I do?"

"I don't know what to advise."

"Could you let him understand how the case stands, and find out whether it

would not be better for him to give me up?"

"I will see what I can do," said Alf.

"Thank you. Now let us talk about something else. I don't think Nelly will come, Alf."

"Why not? Because of —?"

"I don't expect her."

"Because of Tom, you mean. Poor Tom! And yet, Mary, do you think they would have suited each other?"

"In some ways certainly not; in others, yes. I should have dearly liked to have her for a sister," added Mary; "it will be such a pity if this cuts her off from all of us."

"It will, indeed," he replied. "Mary, do you think she has any feeling for Tom?"

Something in Alf's tone made her look up at him. His cheeks were bright pink, and there was a strange expression in his eye.

"Oh, Alf, you too?" she exclaimed.

"It is nothing new," said Alf, quietly. "I

have loved her since she was a very little child. I always hoped that some day she would be my wife. Don't think I value my sister's love the less, darling," put in Alf, hastily.

"No, no, I don't, Alf. Yes?"

"I have never let her find it out. She was so young; she might hardly have known her own mind. But I have been looking forward to Easter, and perhaps I should have spoken now if Tom had not entered the field."

"But if she has refused him, Alf?"

"I must wait until he comes back. I can do nothing until I have seen him. Poor Tom! I don't wonder at his being taken with her; but I am sorry that we should be rivals," ended Alf, with a sigh.

The answer to Mary's letter was, as she expected, a refusal, but contained the news that Nelly had been asked to stand godmother to Mrs. Spencer's baby, and would spend a few days at the Vicarage in the middle of the next month, December, when she looked forward to seeing her friend.

CHAPTER XIII.

When I, that knew him fierce and turbulent,
Refused her to him, then his pride awoke,
And since the proud man often is the mean,
He sowed a slander.

SIR HUMPHREY was duly invited, and came to lunch the following week. He looked harassed and anxious, and Mary was shy and out of spirits. Mrs. Elwood did her best to cover her deficiencies, but all were relieved when the meal was over.

"I should like a word with you, Elwood," said Sir Humphrey, as they left the table.

The baronet followed Alf into the library, and, having carefully closed the door, paced up and down with knitted brows.

"It is a delicate matter to speak to you

about," he began at last, going up to the hearth where Alf was waiting, "but I am so afraid of making a mistake. The fact is, my dear fellow, that I have grave doubts whether what I have done has been at all for your sister's happiness. It is clear that my presence distresses her, and she is growing quite pale and thin. That is far from what I contemplated when I asked her to give me a chance, and she was so good as to consent."

"I am sure it is. Mary feels your thoughtful kindness, I assure you. I know it troubles her that she cannot make you a full return."

"Do you think there is anything in the way? Anyone that she prefers?"

"Not that I am aware of," replied Alf, promptly; "if it is so, she has guarded her secret very jealously. And yet—"

He hesitated and looked puzzled.

"There are grounds for thinking so?" supplied Sir Humphrey, anxiously.

"No, not grounds. But it just came into my mind that when I put that question to her the other day she did not give me a decided negative. No doubt she thought I had no right to ask, for she does not like to talk about such things. It was quite like her to turn it off."

"Do you know why your sister left Mrs. Blake's?"

"No, we never knew. She would not tell us."

"'M. That is very strange," murmured Sir Humphrey, with a clouded brow.

"What have you heard? What do you know? Do explain, please," entreated Alf.

"I hardly know how far I should be justified in explaining if your sister wishes to keep you in the dark; and yet you might be able to clear up one or two points. It would be almost worse to make a mystery of it now."

"If others know, surely her brother may.

My sister cannot have done anything unworthy of her. If it appear so, there must be some explanation. I beg you to be frank with me."

"I will," replied Sir Humphrey. "In the first place I may tell you, Elwood, that I never came nearer pitching a guest neck and crop out of my house than I did the other day. Did you ever hear of a Major Orres?" he asked, choking down his wrath.

"Orres? Yes. Isn't he engaged to Miss Blake?"

"The same. He is not a man for whom I ever had the least regard. But I have met him several times, and when he wrote to say that he was coming North, it seemed to be the thing to invite him to stay a few days."

"Yes," put in Alf, anxious that Sir Humphrey should come to the point.

But the point was what Sir Humphrey was most reluctant to come to. He turned very red, and, after making several ineffectual

attempts at smoothing the way to it, said abruptly —

"This fellow declares that your sister is in love with him."

"I don't believe it for a moment!" burst out Alf, impulsively.

"That is right. That does one good," said Sir Humphrey, brightening. "But" —his face clouded again—"his tale holds together too well to be merely an invention to gratify his vanity."

"What was his tale?" demanded Alf.

"I will tell you the whole. You shall judge for yourself. The first thing was that he had heard of Brentham. He would like to go to Brentham Church on Sunday. Ah! you saw him?"

"No, *I* didn't. Please go on."

"Your sister did?"

"Yes, Gertie, not Mary."

"I couldn't go with him on your sister's account, so he went alone. Then on Monday

he was in Brentham again. It did strike me he was always hanging about there, but I had never connected the Miss Blake that he was engaged to with your sister's friend. In the evening he seemed quite out of sorts, and he said he had been horribly upset by an interview that he had had in the morning with an old acquaintance. I expressed my surprise, for I did not know that he had any acquaintances in the neighbourhood; and he told me it was a young lady, and said he would make a clean breast of it, and talked about small indiscretions, and so on. I didn't treat the matter seriously at first, and I asked him, jokingly, what business *he* had to hold interviews with young ladies. He said he could not help himself; that it had been very trying, but that the lady had behaved very well ("poor little girl" was omitted by Sir Humphrey). He owned he had trifled with her, and that I can well believe—and, at last, he said she couldn't help betraying herself,

and then she determined she would never see him again, and left suddenly—the puppy, the villain! I can tell you, he was never in his life nearer a horse-whipping!" burst out Sir Humphrey, his face working with rage. "It began to dawn upon me," he resumed, "that I knew the name of Blake. I was disgusted with his way of talking, and mentally resolved that he should never enter my doors again; but it never occurred to me to connect this lady with your sister, or he would have been choked before he had had half his say out."

"It is very strange and perplexing," replied poor Alf. "It is not in the least like Mary. She *might* fall in love with this man if he made up to her, but I cannot believe that her pride would let her betray it to him. Then what reason did he give for seeing her again?"

"His tale is that she wrote to him, that she could not bear it any longer, that she must see him once more. He had to tell

her, he said, that he was going to be married in a fortnight."

Sir Humphrey's eyes flashed as the contemptuously patronizing tone in which the Major had vented his malice, and the concluding remark, "she is a remarkably handsome girl; it is a pity one can't marry two,' rang in his ear.

"I know Mary would not write. On your own showing," pleaded Alf, "do you think such a man's word to be depended upon?"

"My dear Elwood, don't talk as if I wanted to believe it," replied Sir Humphrey, impatiently. "As soon as I knew of whom he was speaking I gave him the lie direct. If he had been twenty times my guest I could not have helped it. But these things stick to one nevertheless, and though I don't for a moment believe that last part of the tale, it does look strangely as if this villain had gained your sister's affections. But what can you tell me? Did she meet him?"

"I believe so; but not by appointment I know. Gertie noticed someone staring very much at Mary in church" —

"The scoundrel! That was his game!"

"Mary did not see him, and could not think who it could be. I am certain of that. Then on Monday Gertie came across him again. Mary went out to inquire after Mr. Spencer, but she turned back, and fainted when she came in. I think she must have met him then."

"She fainted, you say. Is that a common thing?"

Alf shook his head.

"I am afraid there can be but one conclusion. Your sister's affections have been played with by this man. She has been bravely trying to overcome her feeling for him, but he—shameless coxcomb, black-hearted villain!—comes here to tighten his hold upon her, and that, knowing that he is going to be married in a fortnight! Oh, Elwood, I could curse him."

"It is dreadful. Poor Mary! It must be a terrible burden to her. I don't wonder that it is wearing her out. A burden to her more than to most, for she has such strong feelings about honour and loyalty, and she must feel that she is wronging her friend. I know she does, poor child; for now I understand why it was that in her wild delirium one of the few things that we could make out were entreaties to 'Maude,' and excuses and self-reproachings."

"What should I do?" asked Sir Humphrey, sorrowfully. "I would not add a feather's weight to her burden."

"I know it," said Alf. "Sir Humphrey, I wish I could thank you"— Alf's full heart would not let him go on.

"For making you share my trouble. Very unselfish wasn't it?"

"For all your generous kindness to Mary. I am sorry it should have such a poor return. I know that grieves her too. She should have

given you some idea of this, but no doubt she hoped—perhaps thought, she was getting over it—until this—this man turned up again. You will try to forget her."

Sir Humphrey had been lost in his own thoughts; the last words roused him.

"Forget. That is more easily said than done. This is a sad shock to me, but I love your sister as dearly as ever. I am sure she is true, I am sure she is kind, but I see she is doing violence to her own feelings in trying to care for me. I am not going to persecute her any more. This man will be married soon; then she must forget him, and in time she might learn to care for me."

"She thinks that possible herself," said Alf. "But who can say when? Is it right to ask you to wait?"

"Wait? My dear, good fellow what else can I do?" replied Sir Humphrey, with a melancholy smile. "She must take her own time. And I must not force myself upon her

in future, or she will look upon me as her cross. I have tried to make our meetings as pleasant and unembarrassing as possible, but it doesn't answer. I am going up to town in a few days. Will you let her know that when I come back I shan't tease her? Now we must really absent ourselves no longer, or something may be suspected."

Something assuredly would have been suspected, for Alf carried his trouble in his "transparent" face, but that Mary was absorbed in her own anxieties, and consequently absent and unobservant.

When Sir Humphrey and Alf came into the room she was sitting near the window, looking out, and started when the baronet spoke to her.

He was quite himself again, and sat down and chatted pleasantly, while Mary brightened up correspondingly, and actually felt a shade of regret mingle with the sense of relief when Sir Humphrey told her that he was on the eve

of going up to town, and would be away for some considerable time.

The predicted date of Maude's wedding was drawing near, and the thought of it weighed heavily upon Mary's already burdened mind.

One day she had almost determined to write to Maude; the next she rejected the idea as likely to do more harm than good, and fell back upon the faint hope that something might occur to prevent its taking place.

But at last uncertainty was put an end to —Gertie read aloud the announcement in the *Times*.

Mary listened silently with a troubled expression, leaning her cheek on her hand, but, catching Alf's eye fixed anxiously upon her, she said —

"I knew they were to be married about this time," and almost immediately left the room.

She went upstairs, and spent the greater part of the morning thinking of and praying for her friend.

It seemed so terrible to her that they should marry without caring for one another, and she bitterly reproached herself for the self-will that had led her into the position in which she had wronged her friend.

If she had but known it, she reproached herself needlessly with regard to Maude. Maude had her husband, her position—everything, in fact, that she wanted from this marriage. A doting spouse she would have considered a most intolerable nuisance, and the perfection of a husband was one who would allow her, as Mrs. —, to act very much as she did as Miss —.

But Mary could not understand this, and she still clung to the fiction of a heart hidden under Maude's frivolity and apparent coldness.

When she came down, with traces of tears upon her face, Alf was, if possible, more than usually tender and affectionate in his manner, but he took no other notice of her disappearance.

"How I shall miss you, you dear brother," thought Mary; but the twin thought was, "I hope you may get what you want."

"Nelly comes to the Spencer's to-night, doesn't she?" she asked.

"Yes," said Alf; "when do you think you will see her?"

"I shall go and set upon her to-morrow, and—oh, the day after you will all be away. Don't you think I had better make her come to tea with me, and get over her shyness?"

"Yes, dear, do."

Mary marched off to Mr. Spencer's next morning to "set upon" her friend. Nelly was in her room, so she begged to go up and announce herself.

A gentle voice said, "Come in" in answer to her tap at the door.

"Here you are, you little, horrid thing. Don't I know 'your tricks and your manners?'" said Mary, taking Nelly in

her arms, and supplying the stops with kisses. "She is the most affected piece of nonsense that ever was. She was just going to pretend to be shy of me, now wasn't she?"

Mary had seated herself in a chair, and pulled Nelly on to her knee.

Nelly clung to her, hiding her blushing face on her friend's shoulder.

"Now, give me a kiss, chick, and promise you won't be so silly, and that you will come to tea with me to-morrow."

"Oh, Mary, dear, I can't. I *should* like, but—now wouldn't you be shy?"

"I shall be all by myself. Mamma and Gertie are going off this afternoon to spend two or three days with a cousin of mamma's, and Alf will be away to-morrow night. He is going to help at a mission week. I want to beg you of Mrs. Spencer as a protection against the bogeys."

"If you are all by yourself, I'll come; and

I should like to stay the night if Mrs. Spencer will let me."

"You needn't mind the others, Nelly; only Alf and I know about something."

"I thought you did," whispered Nelly, with averted face and very rosy cheeks.

"I shall get into Mrs. Spencer's black books, and she won't let you come if I stay up here too long," said Mary, reluctantly making a move to rise.

Nelly was not prepared to go down with such a tell-tale face, so Mary left her and went to prefer her request to Mrs. Spencer.

"She will come, Alf," announced Mary when she reached home.

"I shall think of you to-morrow night," said Alf.

CHAPTER XIV.

When I said I would die a bachelor,
I did not think I should live till I were married.

THERE are times when the air seems charged with events. Whether such a condition is due to magnetic disturbance and the spots on the sun, and may be further traced to the vagaries of Venus and her brother planets, is a question which must be left in the haze which still envelops the subject.

Mary had finished her solitary breakfast, and the maid had just carried out the tray, pulling the door to after her with that prehensile foot handed down to her kind from our hairy forefathers.

Left to herself, Mary drew her chair to the fire, and sat gazing into the glowing embers, while she called up in review the "changes and chances" of the year that was now drawing to a close. Her leaving home, the sad consequences of her governess life, Effie's marriage, the complication of her brothers' love affairs, Sir Humphrey's suit, and last, but by no means least, the spontaneous growth of her love for Maurice—all these rose in quick succession before her, and Mary longed for a lull in the course of events.

The most cheering thought that came to her was that now it was the middle of December, that Nelly's visit would help her through a few more days, and that then she might look forward to Christmas which would bring various little distractions and occupations. By that time surely Tom would come home, and Alf might speak to Nelly, and—but the idea was banished at once, Mary

did not dare to dwell on the possibility of Maurice's coming to see his sister amongst her new relations before he went away.

She was so lost in thought that she did not hear the door open, and almost jumped out of her seat, when she felt a strong hand laid on each arm, and a jolly voice behind her said—

"Polly all over! In a brown study, I declare!"

Mary, almost startled into hysterics, rushed upon the intruder and hugged and kissed him to her heart's content.

"Tom! is it really you?" she gasped.

"I really couldn't say. You should have made sure of that a little sooner."

"I am quite sure nobody but Tom would make such a speech as that," said Mary; and he had to undergo a second infliction of kisses and hugs, to which he submitted with wonderfully good grace.

"You are browner, Tom, but you look thin. Yes, very thin."

"I dare say."

"Have you been ill?"

"Yes, I'll tell you about it presently. Where's everybody?"

"I am all by myself. Mamma and Gertie are at Cousin Jane's, and Alf is away till to-morrow morning."

"Gertie as jolly as ever and the mater well? That's right. And Effie?"

"She is quite well, I believe."

"Not at home? Where is she gone off to?"

"I hope you won't mind very much, Tom dear. Effie is married," replied Mary, who thought that the sooner the unpleasant news came out the better.

"To Sims, I suppose?"

"Yes."

Tom knit his brows, but he looked grieved rather than angry.

"I had no right to be so hard upon her," he said, after a pause. "We must make the

best of it now, and I must go and pay my respects to Brother Inigo, I suppose," he added with a comical grimace.

"Orlando!" corrected Mary.

"I had forgotten. When were they married? As soon as my back was turned?"

"No, before you went away. While Effie was at Mrs. Barritt's. We found it out soon after you left."

"That was bad," said Tom, gravely. "But I am afraid I am to blame for it;" and he looked so concerned that Mary was glad to change the subject.

"Now, Tom, sit down and tell me about yourself. Why did you never write?"

"I thought I would take you by surprise. I came by the night train from Liverpool, and if I had written you would only have got the invoice an hour before the goods. You heard a week or two ago. I told you I had been ill, you know."

"No, we didn't. We haven't had a letter

for about six weeks. And Mr. Forrest is beginning to think you a very funny partner."

"Hasn't he heard either, then?"

"No."

"Here's a pretty go! Why, as soon as ever my fingers would hold a pen, I wrote to say how it was I couldn't keep to time! And that nincompoop of a fellow never posted my letters! Old Forrest will think me a cool chap. It's a nuisance, too, for that's not my style of doing things."

"Mr. Forrest said to some one—'I am surprised at Elwood. He knows that I am always ready to oblige him, but I never knew him take undue advantage of me before.'"

"I must go out and set that to rights. Of course I should have written—and to you folks too. What did you think had come to me?"

"I don't know. If it had been anybody else we should have been more anxious; but somehow one always imagines you will fall on your feet."

Tom took that as a compliment, but his face grew very grave as he said—

"I nearly came a worse cropper than that a little while ago. I contrived to catch a fever, and I can tell you I was pretty nearly beat. I thought I should never see you again at one time. But the old woman who nursed me pulled me through. And, Polly, in those weary days, after the fever, when I could do nothing but crawl about, or lie still and curse my fate, I came to myself. I saw what a selfish dog I had been all my life, and many more things that I had never known before, and while I 'was yet a great way off' —you know the rest, Polly."

Mary had never taken her eyes from his face, though the tears were rolling down her cheeks. When he stopped speaking, she knelt down on the rug beside him, and laid her hands on his. After a few moments' silence, Tom asked —

"Have you heard anything about *her* lately?"

"Yes; and what must I do? She is at the Spencers', and she was coming to tea and going to keep me company to-night."

"Here!" and, after the first expression of surprise, Tom turned away his head, so that Mary could not see his face. "You know best what to do. You might see her this afternoon. I must go and make things straight with old Forrest. Good-bye;" and, refusing to wait for any breakfast, he went off.

He returned before lunch, and came and stood before his sister stock-still, with arms folded and immovable features.

"Well?" said Mary.

"Well," mimicked Tom.

"Where have you been, and what have you done?"

"What, indeed?"

Mary looked up into Tom's shining eyes.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried, jumping up and laying her hand on his arm. "What is it?"

The expression in Tom's eyes communicated itself to his mouth.

"Do speak, Tom, there's a dear boy!" implored Mary. "Have you been —"

"And gone and done it? Wal, I guess I have."

"Tom, dear, I am so glad!" said Mary, kissing him and laughing excitedly. Then she thought of poor Alf, and sobered down in a minute.

"I didn't think you would object," said Tom, too full of his own happiness to notice the shade on his sister's face.

It was not allowed to remain.

"I do think you are a fortunate fellow, Tom, and there's nobody I should like so well for a sister."

"She'll come to tea, Polly. I am going to fetch her, and I shall see her home."

"Where did you find her?"

"I was on my way there, and I met her in the fields."

"Did you forget all about Mr. Forrest, then?"

"Oh, no; business first," replied Tom, looking very virtuous. "It's all right; but I shall have to begin to-morrow, and stick close to work, so I mean to make the most of my holiday."

"I little thought this morning who would keep me company in my solitude," said Mary.

Still less had she contemplated such a tea party.

The lovers arrived in due course. Tom, proud and triumphant, announced, "Here she is!" and ushered in Nelly, prettier than ever, and, though blushing and bashful, looking so supremely happy, that Mary could not but feel that things had turned out rightly, and that in Alf, with his almost feminine gentleness, Nelly would not have found the complement of her own sweet, clinging nature.

Tom was brimming over with nonsense and mischief, and Mary put away sad thoughts, and was as merry as might be at tea-time.

But when she had left the lovers to themselves, and sat down by the fire in the unlighted drawing-room, all her sympathies went out to poor Alf.

She took care to meet him at the station next morning.

"This is good of you," he said, warmly, as he got out of the train. "Have you been very lonely?"

"Not at all. I have had company."

"Did Nelly stay all the time?"

"No; someone else. I have good news for you, and bad news, dear Alf."

"What is it?" he asked, anxiously. "Any word from Tom?"

"Tom himself. He has been ill, and his letters were not posted."

"Then is he no better?"

"Yes; he seems pretty well again. And you shall have the best news of all first. I know you never forget to pray for Tom; the answer has come."

Alf's face lighted up with joy.

"That is worth hearing, indeed! Now the bad news," he added, after a pause.

Mary was loth to give it. Alf caught the wistful expression of sympathy on her face.

"Is it — ?" he began.

"Alf, dear, we must be more than ever to each other now."

He pressed her hand, but did not speak. After walking on silently for some distance, they came in sight of the stile leading to the path through the fields so memorable to Mary.

"I am very selfish to grudge him this happiness," said Alf. "Will you go home, dear, and leave me to follow? Your love is very precious to me, darling Mary, but I should like to be alone just now."

"I understand," said Mary, dashing away the tears from her eyes; and she walked on by the road, while Alf crossed into the fields.

He appeared at home before Tom came in, and Mary saw by his calm expression that he had gained the mastery.

There was no sign of the struggle when he greeted his brother.

"Well, Tom, my dear fellow; this is more than I expected. I am glad to see you."

"So Polly let the cat out of the bag. Where was the woman that could keep a secret?"

"Tom, Tom, you mustn't talk in that way *now*," remonstrated Mary.

"I'll be bound my other cat's out too, and my bag's empty," complained Tom.

"Yes, it is," replied Alf, with a smile in which there was no trace of jealousy; "and I wish you joy of your new treasure with all my heart. You could not have brought us a sweeter sister."

CHAPTER XV.

I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?

"POLLY, what is all this nonsense about Maurice not coming here to say good-bye?" exclaimed Tom, as he came in, bringing Nelly to lunch, a few days after his engagement.

"He hasn't time. He wants Alf to go there."

"He must make time. Alf isn't the only person that wants to see him. What do you say, Nell? Surely he can spare a day or two."

"I think he might. He is busy certainly; still —"

"He *shall* come, then, if I go and fetch him. I'll send him a summons to-day, and we'll all spend a merry Christmas together."

"I must go home for Christmas," urged Nelly.

"Tuts! Nothing of the sort. You are mine now, you know."

"Who gave me to you?" ventured Nelly, in her quiet way.

"You did."

"I can't remember it. I don't believe I was ever asked. He just took me, Mary."

"That's about it. But I have got you safe enough now, and I mean to keep you," said Tom, giving Nelly's arm such a squeeze that she was obliged to cry him mercy.

"Still, you must let me go home for Christmas," she protested. "It will be our last all together, you know, for we can't say how long."

"Then he shall come afterwards. I must see something of him before he goes. That

brother of yours is a grand fellow, Nell. There are not many men with his abilities and his prospects that would bury themselves amongst the blacks. It will be awfully lonely for him, too. He ought to be made to get a wife."

"I wish he could," replied Nelly, sorrowfully.

Mary had disappeared, afraid of betraying herself by a heightened colour.

The faint hope of Maurice's yielding to Tom's summons threw her into a fever of suspense, but when her brother announced, a day or two later, "Maurice will be here for New Year's Day," her face assumed an expression of content and repose, though what she expected from his visit, but that it would make matters worse, she could not have told.

"Time and the hour run through the roughest day," and days do pass through the longest week; so Maurice came at last, bringing back Nelly with him. But Mary

was shy and constrained, and felt herself stiffen all over whenever he came into the room, and Maurice was more distant than she had ever known him, remembering, no doubt, the way she had treated him on his last visit. So before he had been there a couple of days she had repented of her longing to see him, and felt that there would be no peace for her until the sea rolled between them. Mary knew from experience that she could bear disappointment better than suspense.

Maurice, too, wished to be gone. His face had lost its light-heartedness, and his expression, when he did not know himself observed, was sad and depressed.

Tom was troubled about him.

"Are you sure, Alf," he said one day, "that Hughes has not made a mistake? He looks horribly down in the mouth. I should say it was killing for a fellow like him to go off there without a wife or a soul belonging to him. He'll be dished up in no time. Why,

bless you, until he knows the language, he can't even talk to the cat. Couldn't he draw back?"

"Maurice is not one to draw back," replied Alf. "Besides, I am sure he doesn't regret his decision."

Tom knitted his brows and looked doubtful.

"Then," he said, "it must be a change that he wants. We must try to keep him a little longer."

"I can ask him, if you like," said Alf; and, to satisfy Tom, took the first opportunity of doing so.

"Don't press me to stay," begged Maurice. "What is the use of tantalizing oneself?"

"You know how glad I should be that you might have your wish," replied Alf, sorrowfully, laying his hand on Maurice's shoulder.

Maurice looked up with a gloomy, harassed face; then he hung his head.

"What do you think of me, Alf? What am I worth?—warranted for fine weather,"

he said, jerking out his sentences in a tone of strong self-contempt. "You know until the last year or so I have always had what one might call a very jolly life both at school and college, and, of course, at home, and, therefore—I hope you see the logic—at the first slap in the face I must needs behave myself exactly like a spoilt child—no, no excuses. Plenty of men go through the same thing and bear it without making fools of themselves, and here am I with the work that I wanted—with everything, in fact, but the one thing I wanted most—but it's *no* good, Alf," he broke off, abruptly, "it is terrible to me to be in the house with her;" and he buried his face in his hands.

"I can understand it," said Alf, in a tremulous voice. "It is very hard."

Maurice started to his feet.

"How could I have been so blind?" he exclaimed, grasping his friend's hand, his own trouble forgotten in the discovery that

had flashed upon him. "Oh, Alf!" he added, in a sad and humbled tone, "you do put me to shame!"

"No, it is harder for you than for me," replied Alf.

"Of course it is, because you are a fifty times better fellow than I am. No, I know perfectly well that that's not *your* view of the case. But you have preached me a good sermon, dear old man, and I thank you for it."

The best thing for Maurice, Alf thought, was to keep him out of sight of Mary as much as possible. So for the few remaining days he devised long walks, in which he got Tom to join them when at liberty, and on the last afternoon he took Maurice to pay a few farewell calls in Brentham.

Mary, finding herself unable to settle down to work, or read, or practise, wandered out into the garden. If anything could soothe her, it was the repose of evening light.

It was not a brilliant sunset. Day was departing in quiet majesty with glory veiled, and it seemed as if God had laid His hand upon the earth, and it was "silent unto Him." Mary raised her eyes to the grand canopy above, with its mystery of shifting form and subtle gradation of light and colour, and felt abashed and ashamed that she had allowed her trouble to wrap itself round her until it had made her whole world.

As she strolled along, looking up through the leafless twigs that melted into infinity in the gathering twilight, she came to a narrow walk bordered by acacias, and bristling with withered leaf-stalks, planted by the prudent worms to thatch their winter homes.

She turned down it, but, finding the air chill and damp, retraced her steps, and as she emerged into the wider path saw Maurice coming towards her with eyes fixed on the ground and hands clasped behind his back.

He looked up as he came near. Both

were embarrassed, but he was the first to speak.

"I was taking a last wander round the garden," he said, as he walked on by her side.

"It is a charming evening," remarked Mary. "These winter afternoons are very beautiful."

"Yes," answered Maurice, rather absently.

She was wondering what to say next, when he looked up with a smile and said —

"The world is straighter than it used to be, I think?"

"Yes; I found that the most crooked thing in it all was myself."

"You are not the first that has made that discovery," he replied, gravely.

"How shall you like the climate?" asked Mary, as the conversation flagged.

"I can hardly say. To tell the truth, I haven't thought much about it. I am as strong as a horse, you know."

"I think yours is a grand work, and you will have such a wide field and so much new ground to break up."

Mary spoke earnestly in her desire to cheer him.

"Yes, I do look forward to my work, and hope that I may be able to do some good. I wish you every happiness, too, in your new sphere," blurted out Maurice, who had braced himself to make an allusion to Mary's future.

"With Alf, you mean. Thank you. I should like to be a help to him."

"No, I meant something else. Perhaps I ought not to have spoken of it. Mrs. Sims gave me to understand it was a secret."

Mary turned very hot.

"There is some mistake," she said. "I am going to live with Alf, when he goes to a curacy. I thought he might have told you."

"Then," said Maurice eagerly, "please

may I ask you quite plainly? Are you not engaged to Sir Humphrey Stephens?"

"No."

Mary's colour came and went, and she trembled from head to foot.

"Then there is nothing to prevent my telling you, at least, what has been the one trouble of my life. How I had a playfellow many years ago, and never thought there was anyone like her. How I met her again, and could not help loving her, but knew I could not ask her to be a missionary's wife. Then came good news, but before I could get here the rumour of her engagement reached me, and was confirmed on what I supposed was the best authority. You know the rest. I am sure she will not shrink from missionary life, but can she love the missionary?"

"I think she can," replied Mary, lifting her eyes for a moment to his.

They were in sight of the house, but soon put a screen of trees between themselves and

the windows, and found a retired path, where they walked up and down for some little time. At last, possibly because the conversation was so interesting that they forgot to turn at the end of their beat, it came to pass that they varied their course, and found themselves under an ivy-covered wall.

"Do you remember a naughty little girl hiding up there?" asked Maurice.

"Oh, yes, I do," said Mary, recalling the circumstances. "Are you not afraid to undertake a Turk?" she asked, her eyes wavering between tears and laughter.

"Not in the least. It is the height of my ambition to be Sultan."

"Oh, that is your idea, is it?" returned Mary, her mouth curving saucily.

"It is, and my first imperial mandate is to the effect that you shan't walk about any longer without a good warm wrap. I am going in for one;" and Maurice left her.

Surely the bare twigs felt the sap rise and

the shoots put forth as that happy, excited face looked through them to the pale sky beyond.

Maurice soon returned, and wrapped her in a warm Shetland shawl, and they continued their walk. But even lovers are not proof against the chill of a winter evening, so at last they reluctantly turned their steps towards the house.

As Mary ran up on the way to her own room, she encountered Alf, and, without a word, put her arm round him and drew him into the library, groping her way through the darkness.

Before Alf knew where he was, he found himself sitting on the sofa with her hands clasped round him and her head on his shoulder. He had caught the sparkle in her eye, and the bright colour on her cheeks, and was prepared for something pleasant. In fact, he expected to receive her congratulations on a piece of good fortune that had

befallen himself, for he had that afternoon heard of Mr. Spencer's appointment as Vicar of Brentham in place of the old gentleman who had lately resigned, and the new Vicar's first act was to offer him a title to the curacy.

The news, however, had not reached Mary, and, to his amazement, her first words were broken by sobs.

"Oh, Alf, I never thought I should desert you. You have been everything to me, and I did mean to try to be a comfort to you. But I *must* go with Maurice."

Alf started with astonishment as she mentioned Maurice's name. Then he clasped her in his arms.

"Darling Mary, you could not have told me anything that I should have been more glad to hear. Of course it will be hard to part with you, but I am very, very thankful for you both. I never knew that you cared for Maurice."

"I knew," said Mary.

"When did you find it out?"

"You shouldn't ask such questions," she protested, thankful for the darkness. "It was when Sir Humphrey first spoke to me. I tried hard to fight against it, and it made me quite wretched, and I had begun to wish he was right away over the sea."

"Then we must have made a great mistake about you."

"Not you, Alf, surely," remonstrated Mary. "Maurice heard from Mr. Burn that I was engaged, and Effie seems to have confirmed it; but you knew better. I think it has been a conspiracy, for you said something to Maurice which he interpreted as referring to it."

"I must make a clean breast of it. I thought you liked somebody else."

"Whatever are you thinking of?" she exclaimed in extreme surprise. "You don't mean Sydney?" and she laughed in scorn of the idea.

"No, dear. It has been all a mistake. Don't think of it again."

"You *must* tell me," persisted Mary. "Of whom were you thinking?"

"Perhaps it is better you should know. It was Major Orres."

"Oh, Alf!" Mary started to her feet in the utmost indignation. "Oh, Alf!" she repeated.

"Be patient with me, dear," he pleaded; and, seeing no other way out of the difficulty, he gave her an outlined account of what he had heard from Sir Humphrey.

She restrained all expression of indignation until he had ended; then she burst out impetuously —

"I knew I had a persecutor; but I did not know until now that he was an enemy and a slanderer too. He made love to me when he was engaged to Maude, and drove me away from the Blakes'. Then he followed me here to persecute me, and now he slanders me to

Sir Humphrey, and calls it all 'love,' I suppose. And this is the man you think—Oh, Alf! *you* might have known better."

"I am very sorry," said Alf, penitently.

"Never mind, dear old boy. I am unjust to you," returned Mary, who had rapidly put herself in Alf's place. "Of course I see that appearances were all against me. But you will write to Sir Humphrey now, at once, and disabuse him of that horrible idea? I am afraid I have treated him very badly," she said, sorrowfully. "And he has been *so* good to me. Do tell him that I shall never forget his kindness, and say that, though I made a great mistake, I did really wish to act for the best; but I was so muddled and bothered, I didn't know what to do."

Alf offered to write immediately, so Mary left him to think over what he had to say.

In the hall she met Maurice.

"I have just seen Mrs. Elwood," he said. "It will be a great grief to her to part with

you, my darling. See what you can do to comfort her."

Mary found her step-mother sitting with her hands before her, too disconsolate even to knit.

She knelt down beside her, and, laying her head on Mrs. Elwood's lap, asked in her clear, sweet voice —

"Can you spare me, dear mamma?"

"I suppose I must, if you have set your heart upon going. But I do beg you to think it over seriously first. I know you are just the one to be taken with the idea of being a missionary's wife."

"No, that isn't it," put in Mary.

"Well, as I have told you before, I have never seen anything but mischief come of interference in these matters, and I made up my mind that I wouldn't try to influence any of you unless you chose someone quite unsuitable. And, indeed, if you have made up your mind to go, it is quite superfluous to ask

my consent. I have long ceased to imagine that I have any authority in this house."

"Don't say so, please, dear mamma. Do you really wish me to give it up?"

"I think it is a great pity that your education and your accomplishments should be thrown away."

"Oh! Do you think they will be wasted? Of course our work is the first thing, but I don't suppose 'all work and no play' will answer out there any more than in England. And I fancy we shall be glad of all the ideas we can muster, for we shall get none from outside. I don't think my education will be thrown away if it makes me a pleasanter companion to Maurice."

"No; you are so far right. If you marry a man you must be content to live for him. But," continued Mrs. Elwood, dropping her sententious tone, "I am free to confess that I am disappointed. I thought Sir Humphrey was just made for you, and that you would

have been married and lived near us; and now—"

"But I should never have married him," broke in Mary. "I had made up my mind to live with Alf. Would you have liked that better? You know," she added, slyly, "you have often said that old maids have many fewer cares than other people, and may be very happy."

"No, no; that would not have done," replied Mrs. Elwood, decidedly. "Well, well, go your ways, child, but we shall miss you."

Mary looked up, and saw the tears standing in her step-mother's eyes.

"And are you really so sorry to lose this naughty girl that has been such a trouble to you, dear mamma?" she said, putting her arms round her step-mother, and laying her head caressingly on her shoulder.

"It has been so sudden," faltered the good lady, in excuse for her tears, "and it is such a long way off. But dear, dear, such things

must happen," she added, philosophically, drying her eyes, "and all we can do is to make the most of you while we have you. So come and let us get ready for dinner. I quite forgot how time was going, and I am afraid we shall be late"—a practical anxiety which, on the homœopathic principle, exercised a most salutary influence on Mrs. Elwood's mind.

Gertie was told next morning, and bound over to keep the secret. Mary, as demure as a mouse, and Maurice, as grave as a judge, sat through breakfast, hardly venturing to glance at each other, until Tom and Nelly had retired to the library, of which they took possession for the few minutes after breakfast before Tom went out.

"Now's our time," said Maurice; and, taking Mary with him, he put in his head at the library door.

The two nodded and smiled, expecting its hasty withdrawal. But it showed signs of an

impertinent disposition to linger, so Tom rolled up his handkerchief into a ball and aimed it at the intruding visage.

"No, come, I say. I allow you were first in the field, but you've had it to yourselves long enough;" and, putting his arm round Mary, Maurice drew her, laughing and blushing, into the room.

"Hooray!" cried Tom. "That's as it should be;" and then followed such congratulations, and salutations as never were.

"Then, Nell, we'll be married here too, and on the same day," announced Tom.

"Nonsense, Tom!" laughed Mary. "You haven't found a house yet. No; you and Nelly must be groomsman and bridesmaid for us, and I must have that dear child, Alice Blake."

"Shut up, Polly. I didn't ask *you*. You sit on *him*," said Tom, indicating Maurice with his thumb. "Now, Nell, what have you to say to the idea?"

"Don't you think we had better wait?" replied gentle Nelly.

"There, Polly, you've put her up to that. It was owing to you, too, that I ever set eyes on the witch," growled Tom. "I suppose I shall have to do as I am bid now."

"You will have your work cut out in trying to tame your bear, Nelly dear," said Mary.

Nelly looked up at her bear as if she were very well satisfied with him as he was.

"But you will be my bridesmaid, won't you?" repeated Mary.

"No, she will be bride," returned Tom, promptly.

"Go along into the garden, and cut a cabbage, bear. I can make nothing of you."

"All right," said Tom, looking at his watch. "I see that we are meant to skedaddle. Get on your bonnet, Nell, and come with me to look at that house at the corner of the road. We'll be even with 'em yet."

CHAPTER XVI.

> Who are the blest?
> Those who have kept their sympathies awake,
> And scattered joy for more than custom's sake,
> Stedfast and tender in the hour of need.

A MONTH or two later, at an early hour, the quiet town of Brentham presented much the appearance of an ant-hill into which a wanton wight has intruded the end of his stick. The centre of commotion was the parish church, from which people were dispersing in groups, smiling and chatting together, while the bells rang out a merry peal.

Amongst those stirred out of retreat was an old woman who suffered from rheumatic pains and the additional infliction of a "weasel" in

her throat. She hobbled away from the church, leaning on her umbrella, and, finding herself in the vicinity of the shops, took the opportunity of making a few purchases before turning down a back street to have a "crack" with Mrs. Dodd, whom she had once "neighboured."

"Hoo are ye, Sarah Annie?" she began, finding her crony standing at the entrance.

"Nicely, thanks. Hoo's yourself?"

"Why, just middlin'. I can trail aboot a bit. But, says I, I'll be oop tae the church to see the weddins, let come what has a mind. There was a sight for ye!"

"It was sae," assented Mrs. Dodd. "Ye'll not see the likes of that every day. Eh, but I's tar'ble put aboot the morn. I can tell you we'll miss Miss Elwood sore, and James, he doesn't know what to make of hisself, poor man, he feels that bad aboot her goin' away. She's made a vast o' improvement in wor Mat, forby. I tried all wayses to get him to school, and I had t' School Board after him constant,

till Miss Elwood took to noticin' of him. I's a bit ark'ard with him myself, and he won't do nothing for ark'ardness, won't Mattie, but he gangs reg'lar noo, and he's stucken to it this year and more, just to please her. Eh, but she's a good creetur! Nobody can tell hoo kind she's been tiv oos."

"She looked real beautiful the day! T'other yen was a canny bit lass, but Miss Elwood, she was just like a pictur. She'll be well-nigh as tall as her husband, I's warrant. He's a nice-lookin' gentleman."

"Hoots, I hadn't the patience to look at him. Mind, I say nowt agen him, and there's no fear but what she'll be well tret; for we've had him in a good few times, and James thinks a vast on him. If he'd been for settlin' down nigh hand, I wouldn't have felt sae aboot it."

"She'll likely be going away in a Bulman cart. Ye'll mind you and me lookin' in tiv one when we were away with the trip," replied the old woman, who, being too "hard of hear-

ing" to enter thoroughly into her friend's grounds of wailing complaint, found refuge in the details of the wedding.

"There'll be no Bulman carts where *she's* going," returned Mrs. Dodd crossly, "if so be that ever she gets there without being drownded or murdered by them blacks. I give her a piece of my mind when she telled me where she was for going, but she just laughs and says that she ought to have asked me afore she promised to get married. She was always for having her bit joke," continued Mrs. Dodd, softening. "'Well,' says I, 'ye've just been and made a proper mistake this time, and ye'd have done a vast better if ye *had* thought to ask me.' I didn't let on to her what I was meanin', but I heerd tell that Sir Humphrey Stephens, him that's member, was after her."

"Do ye say?"

"I had a lady in the other day that's own cousin to the housemaid at the Grange, so

she ought to know. It was her that let on to me, and eh, what a beautiful present he sent Miss Elwood!"

"Well, well, it do seem hard on her family; but there's all'ays a soomthing! How white the young man looked. Not yon tall one that was married, but him as is going to be priest. He'll be frettin' aboot losin' his sister."

"Ah, he's tied to miss her sore, poor man, for we had 'em in together yenst, and ye could see he was fair lapped up in her. I didn't like his look myself, and for all that I was that taken up with the brides, I couldn't keep my eyes off him. I can't tell you what it was, but while they were singin' the hymn he just fetched my sister to my mind—ye'd ken her—wor Lizzie Mary. A tar'ble good-livin' lass she'd all'ays been, and may be two or three minutes afore she died we was all watchin' her, and she looks up—sae bee-utiful!—and, 'Oh!' says she, 'I see the angels,' and ye'd have said from her face that

they was all aboot the place, smilin' at her."

The old body replied by shaking her head gravely, and they relapsed into silence, until Mrs. Dodd roused herself suddenly,

"It's gettin' on for time Miss Elwood was coomin'," she said, looking up the street.

"This'll not be her way to the station."

"She's coomin' for James to see her. I can tell ye she'd go a long way further nor this out of her road to do a kindness to a poor body. This'll be them. Had awa, Adam, hinny, tell thee da she's a coomin'. Noo, Mat, where's thee pitten thee rice? Look sharp, man."

Mat rushed in for his parcel, and ran off to the station to secure a good position, and Adam found his father already at the window.

The carriage came up and slackened speed. A waving of hands, a vision of a sweet face, the memory of which will cheer the sick man through many a weary day

and sleepless night — and it rolled away to the station where friends were gathered for a last good-bye, and Mat was waiting to do execution with his rice, according to that time-honoured custom, designed no doubt to teach the useful lesson that nothing in this world is to be had without a drawback.

CHAPTER XVII.

Then let us take a ceremonious leave
And loving farewell of our several friends.

FOUR years have passed away since the double wedding in Brentham Church, and in spite of Mrs. Dodd's prognostications, Alf still works with Mr. Spencer. The Elwoods are in mourning, but it is for Effie, who died at the birth of her third child; otherwise the family chain is complete. Mrs. Elwood, a good deal softened in manner, as she is softened and improved in appearance by the silvering of her locks, still holds the reins of government at Elwood Grange, and Gertie, who calls herself "Alf's wife," and considers

him a sacred trust, is still at home, and turns the cold shoulder to Walter Lawson, now a solicitor in partnership with his father, having determined to remain faithful to her brother so long as he continues single.

Alf, quite unconscious of having a rival, asks, in reply to the advice to marry freely showered upon him by a certain class of parishioners, what a man who has already "a wife, two homes, and bairns as good as his own," can possibly want more, and up to the present time has shown no inclination to change his state, though report says that a certain young lady, who struck up a bosom friendship with Gertie at Mary's wedding, and spends a few weeks from time to time at Elwood Grange, would not be unwilling to help him to do so.

Whether such be the case or not I cannot say, for everything connected with her beloved Mary is *couleur de rose* in Alice's eyes, even including Mrs. Elwood, in whose good graces

she has installed herself. Alf laughs at her blunt sallies, and treats her with elder-brotherly kindness, feeling much for the loneliness and unsatisfactory nature of her life at home; but it has not yet occurred to him that he might love a second time.

Alice makes no secret of the pleasure that it gives her to stay at Elwood Grange, and, though she is a good daughter and cannot be prevailed upon to leave her mother for nearly so long a time as Gertie would like, she pulls a doleful face when her visits come to an end, and wishes that she lived at Brentham, and might help Gertie in her parish work.

Alice never tires of talking over the old days when she was Mary's pupil; but she seldom speaks of her sister. On one occasion when she happened to refer to her as "poor Maude," Gertie's curiosity got the better of her discretion, and she asked, "Why do you say 'poor Maude?'"

"Because I think it is so dreadful for people

that hate each other to have to live together. Percy has the most frightful temper. I saw him in a rage once." Alice paused, and her look implied that it was an experience she did not wish repeated, while Gertie reflected with satisfaction that no one would ever see Walter Lawson in a rage.

"I can't say that all the fault is on his side, however," continued Alice. "No one can be more provoking than Maude when she likes. You mustn't say anything about it, because people don't know that they aren't happy together."

"It would be horrid to have it talked about," assented Gertie, her mind reverting to a case, something similar, nearer home, where disagreement had not been kept so snug. For it had come about that, on hearing of Mary's engagement, Sydney Forrest, to show that it was nothing in the world to him, had taken the first opportunity of proposing to, and had shortly after married, his

cousin Julia. He was not long in discovering that if he had escaped a Turk he had caught a Tartar, and "Mrs. Sydney's latest" forms a favourite topic of conversation amongst Brentham gossips.

Rumour says, and this time truly, that another of Mary's sometime admirers is about to bring home a bride. But though Sir Humphrey has found a new love, he has not forgotten the old one, and keeps up his friendship with the Elwood brothers, and makes frequent inquiries after Mrs. Hughes. Recent accounts have been a cause of anxiety, for Mary has been suffering from a severe attack of fever, but the last mail has thrown the whole Elwood family into a state of joyful expectation, for Maurice, in his *rôle* of Sultan, insists that his wife shall try the re-invigorating effect of English air, and she is expected with her two youngest children before many months are over.

It devolved upon Gertie to carry the tidings

on winged feet to her sister-in-law, and the first intimation to Tom was from the lips of his sturdy young namesake, who had been taught as his morning lesson to lisp "Auntie Mary."

Tom nodded his satisfaction as his dear little wife communicated the good news; then proceeded to express it emphatically —

"Why, bless you, Nell, I'd have given that jewel of a pipe for a sight of the old girl!" —the untimely end of which favourite companion has been the most serious trial that has befallen Tom since he quitted his bachelor's estate.

THE END.